WHAT ETHICS EXPERTS DON'T KNOW Gordon Marino

COMMONWEAL

A Review of Religion, Politics, and Culture

March 23, 2001

Van Gogh & Gauguin

(Two Religious Guys)

Donna Gustafson

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COMMONWEAL

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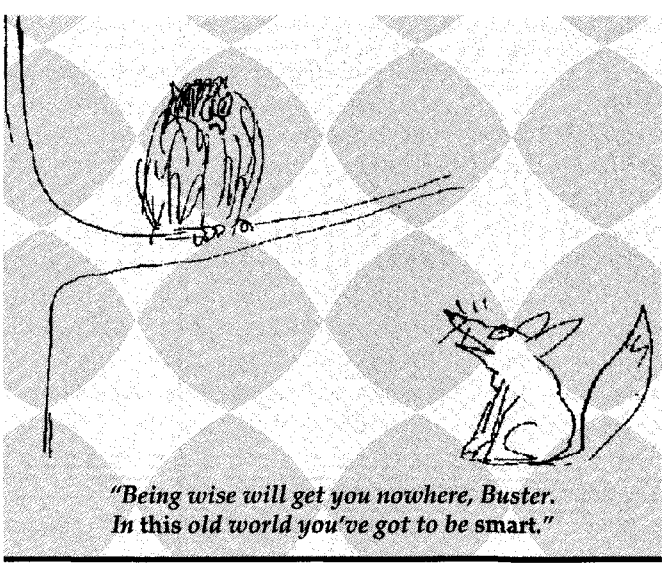

"Being wise will get you nowhere, Buster. In this old world you've got to be smart."

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To the Editors

Inspiring woman

What a wonderful article by Sister Mary Carita ["At Bayonet Point," February 23]. I have known her since 1955 and was fortunate to have her as a teacher at Saint Elizabeth College in Convent Station, New Jersey, and later as a superior in the religious order of the Sisters of Charity. She has always been a source of courage, understanding, and compassion to us who have come under her influence. Many times when I have stumbled and lost courage I have thought of her strength. God bless her and all who have given their lives for others. ROBERTA PAUL HORTON

Naples, Fla.

Man the wall!

I was disappointed by the swipe at Americans United for Separation of Church and State in your recent editorial on President George W. Bush's "faith-based" initiative ["Church, State & Money," February 23]. You chide us for warning of the imminent destruction of the "supposedly sacrosanct" wall of separation between church and state, but then spend the rest of the editorial raising many of the same objections to the Bush scheme that we have made (see "Bush's 'Faith-Based' Plan: An AU Top 10 List on Why It's Wrong" at our Web site, www.au.org).

We oppose the Bush proposal in part because of its deleterious effect on religion. One need only look to Europe to see what happens when government funds churches. Houses of worship in most European countries receive generous tax support, but they are all but empty on Sundays. Volunteers and donations build strong churches; government subsidies enervate them.

The "wall of separation" you so casually dismiss has protected the religious institutions of America in many ways. It ought not be bulldozed by President Bush—or *Commonweal*.

JOSEPH CONN

Washington, D.C.

The writer is director of communications for Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

The editors reply:

The potentially deleterious effects of government funding of faith-based services are of real concern, but that concern is quite different from the position of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, which argues that such initiatives are, or should be, unconstitutional. As the editorial noted, separation of church and state does not require an impermeable "wall" between government and religious groups.

Rotten egg?

J.A. Schumpeter said that the first thing a man will do for his ideals is lie. Don Wycliff, the reviewer of my book *A Personal Odyssey* ["Look Back in Anger," February 9], must be very idealistic because he manages to completely misstate a brief episode in a New York subway, as anyone can see by simply comparing his account with pages 168–169 of the book. This is by no means the only gross distortion in his review, but you don't need to eat a whole egg to know that it is rotten.

THOMAS SOWELL

Stanford, Calif.

The reviewer replies:

Thomas Sowell accuses me of misstating his account of an incident in the New York City subway. He invites readers to go to the source and see for themselves. I urge them to do the same. I am confident they'll find my rendition of the account accurate. If Sowell had challenged any of my opinions about his book, I might have been inclined to defer to him. But not on this factual matter.

As for the other "gross distortions" that he alleges, I await proof.

DON WYCLIFF

Jason Robards, R.I.P.

Seeing Jason Robard's name among the Commonweal Associates contributors for 2000 [February 23] brought me up sharply with an urge to stand and applaud his talent and prowess. He was a seaman, probably not yet out of his teens (like so many of his cohorts in those grim and dreadful times) serving on a tin-can in the harbor at Pearl when the Japanese planes flew in to take out the fleet. His ship was probably the only one to get up steam, get under way, and fight back. And I wondered whether, then, he ever thought that he'd live to see the end of the millennium or even the end of the coming war. Probably not. Few did. They did what they had to do and took their chances. Most never looked back. In their innocence they left it to the revisionists to explain what had gone on.

PAUL LOCKREY

Indian Mills, N.J.

Girl talk

The articles on confession ["Empty Confessionals," February 23] were a wonderful idea. I was reminded of the most recent confession experience in my own family (sorry to break the seal of the confessional), when my two daughters (aged eleven and nine) went to confession during a parish penance service. I suspect they confessed the usual eleven- and nine-year-old sins (brutal persecution of their six-year-old sister, mostly), but they were then interrogated by the priest (a recently ordained older man) who asked, "And do you do your homework every day?" and "How about your parents, do you obey them all the time?" They came back to their seats after this experience with what I can only describe as relatively patient but perfectly appropriate eye rolling. I doubt this is something they'll do again, other than under duress, for some time.

This isn't to knock all priests who

(Continued on page 28)

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All dressed up

Last month's consistory in Rome, in which John Paul II elevated forty-four men to the College of Cardinals, received a good deal of media coverage, especially in New York and Washington, D.C. That's not surprising, since the archbishops of both cities, Edward Egan and Theodore McCarrick, were among those "getting the red hat," as was Fordham University theologian Avery Dulles, S.J. Local TV news in New York couldn't seem to get enough of all the arcane Roman "pageantry." Egan's every move was covered, from the moment he left the city to a press conference upon his return. Newspaper stories and TV and radio commentators went on endlessly about the "biretta," the "zucchetto," the "mozzettas," the gold ring, the red carpet, the pope's shimmering robes and white velvet throne. February can be a slow news month, and Roman pomp and circumstance is still an eye-catching version of pomp and circumstance. It is also an easy story to cover. The pictures from Saint Peter's Square on an unusually warm and bright day were sharp and colorful, the rows of scarlet-robed prelates encircling the pope's chair a strong visual sign of Catholic solidarity and order.

Up to a point, that is.

There's a place for pageantry and for grand ecclesiastical ritual. Honoring bishops and priests in great formal ceremonies is one way the church expresses its deepest understanding of itself. Gold rings and elaborate garments have long accompanied the people of God on their pilgrim journey. In what some of his disciples thought a scandalous extravagance, even Jesus allowed himself to be anointed with precious oil.

Still, it is difficult not to feel some discomfort over the carefully made-up face the church presents to the world on such occasions. Cardinal Egan made a point of saying that it was the New York archdiocese, not he, that was being honored. But that doesn't quite get at the unique power and status cardinals possess or the way in which they are chosen. Egan is still finding his way in New York, and must act in the late Cardinal John O'Connor's considerable shadow. That said, the new cardinal has yet to convey much warmth or pastoral vision, let alone Christian mirth. Perhaps that is the result of his deep suspicion—often warranted—of the media. Whatever the reason, his public persona seems guarded and calculating and his repeated protestations of humility usually fall flat. If it was the archdiocese that was being honored, for example, the cardinal probably shouldn't have stayed, albeit as a guest of the hotel's chairman, at the Crowne Plaza Rome-Minerva, and his entourage could have done without those well-known evangelists and countercultural figures General Electric president Jack Welch and NBC head Robert Wright.

With his sly wit, Avery Dulles made a more elfin impression—especially when his biretta fell off his head into the pope's lap. No one could begrudge Dulles his red hat. As Joseph Komonchak rightly noted in these pages ("All Dressed in Scarlet," February 23), Dulles's theological work has been a beacon of lucidity in a field increasingly burdened by jargon-ridden academic writing. A deep love for and devotion to the church are evident in everything he writes. Still, it is hard to

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Correction ■ In the February 23 issue listing the Commonweal Associates, we failed to include the names of Rev. James A. Coriden, D.C., a Patron, and Charter members George Cody, N.J., and Raymond J. Casey, Ill. We apologize to these generous Associates.

suppress the suspicion that Dulles's more recent efforts defending disputed papal teachings rather than his broader achievements figured uppermost in the Vatican's decision making. That suspicion would be easier to dismiss if similar regard were shown for theologians of equal stature who have respectfully taken issue with the pope's views. The late Richard McCormick, S.J., and Gustavo Gutiérrez come to mind as men whose lifetime of service to the church cannot be second-guessed, yet whose work has not always toed the magisterium's line. A truly confident church would distribute red hats across a wider ideological spectrum.

Finally, one aspect of the pageantry in Rome was even more conspicuous than the color red. Doubtless those made cardinals are persons of talent and great loyalty to the church. They are also all, without exception, men. No matter how good a show the Vatican puts on, it remains an all-male show.

How long will it take before Rome recognizes how anachronistic and unnecessary this part of the tradition is? How long will the church reserve its most public honors and all juridical authority for men only? Even should the priesthood remain closed to women, there is no possible theological or moral excuse for denying women a position of authority in the official structure of the church (see Mary Douglas, "A Modest Proposal," June 14, 1996). Please spare us the solemn talk about the profound symbolism of the cardinal's office as long as the symbolic and implied rebuke to women remains so central an aspect of these events. If there is a place for great ecclesiastical rituals—a place for scarlet robes and gold rings and extravagant gestures of fealty that tell the world what it means to be Catholic—it is a scandal to the faithful that such rituals exclude women.

But congratulations, anyway, boys.

ET CETERAS

We have lists ■ Looking for a guide to "authentically Catholic" universities, colleges, and seminaries? Visit www.mandata.org, which is complete with links to lists of university faculty who have obtained the *mandatum* to teach theology, as required by *Ex corde ecclesiae*.

Father John J. Stryjewski, webmaster and priest of the Archdiocese of Mobile, Alabama, has devised the *mandatum* quotient (MQ)—"a decimal number formed by dividing the number of faculty members who have received the mandatum by the total number of eligible faculty members"—to rate Catholic schools and seminaries on a five-star scale. An MQ of 1.0 yields a five-star rating, while an MQ of .5 and under merits only two stars.

The U.S. norms for the application of *Ex corde* have not yet been implemented. If the bishops approve them in May, Catholic professors of theology will still have two years to obtain the *mandatum*. This makes Father Stryjewski's list of schools with any rating at all very short. The Catholic University of America, The Josephinium, Steubenville, and Christendom College are five-star schools. Viterbo University and Loyola University Chicago bring up the rear, with MQs of .12 and .04, respectively.

"Please remember," Fr. Stryjewski writes, "that the MQ is just a dispassionate number...which might condition answers to your questions about authentic Catholic teaching." Good thing we won't be seeing any McCarthyite tactics in the discussion of the Catholic identity of colleges and universities.

Future tensions ■ Not even his fans have accused President George W. Bush of being quick or eloquent on his feet. Earlier this month, he showed again why extemporaneous speaking is not his forte. During the diplomatic visit of South Korean President Kim Dae Jung, Bush informed Kim that Washington would not be pursuing a missile agreement with North Korea. Kim, who had worked diligently with President Bill Clinton to achieve such an agreement, was disappointed. Bush explained his reasoning on the North Koreans as follows: "We're not certain as to whether or not they're keeping all terms of all agreements."

The problem with Bush's explanation is that, in fact, North Korea has only one agreement with the United States, a 1994 treaty on freezing plutonium processing at a nuclear weapons plant. There is no evidence that North Korea has violated that treaty.

Asked what agreements Bush was referring to, a White House spokesman said the president was talking about *future* agreements. "That's how the president speaks," he explained.

Far be it from us to suggest that the White House is fudging on this one. Perhaps the president wasn't entirely clear about what agreements the U.S. has with North Korea. But before the tensions escalate, we think the secretary of grammar should work with the president on his future tenses.

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OF SEVERAL MINDS

PAUL BAUMANN

AGENT HANSSEN

The spy who came in from the fold

Kim Philby's *My Silent War* disclosed how he rose to head the British Secret Service's counterespionage operation while working as a Soviet spy. In the introduction to that book, Graham Greene compared Philby to "Catholics, who, in the reign of Elizabeth, worked for the victory of Spain."

Greene, of course, had a soft spot for those committed to duplicity or betrayal, especially if belief or passion rather than ego or greed motivated their crimes.

Greene, Philby, and the ambiguities of religious belief come to mind in trying to make sense of the life of Robert Philip Hanssen, the FBI counterintelligence expert now accused of spying for the Soviets and Russia. In explaining his motives to the Russians, Hanssen is reported to have mentioned Philby's book. One wonders if he read Greene's introduction. Hanssen was not only apparently a serious convert to Catholicism, he is a member of Opus Dei, the secretive Catholic organization much praised by Catholic conservatives and favored by the current papacy.

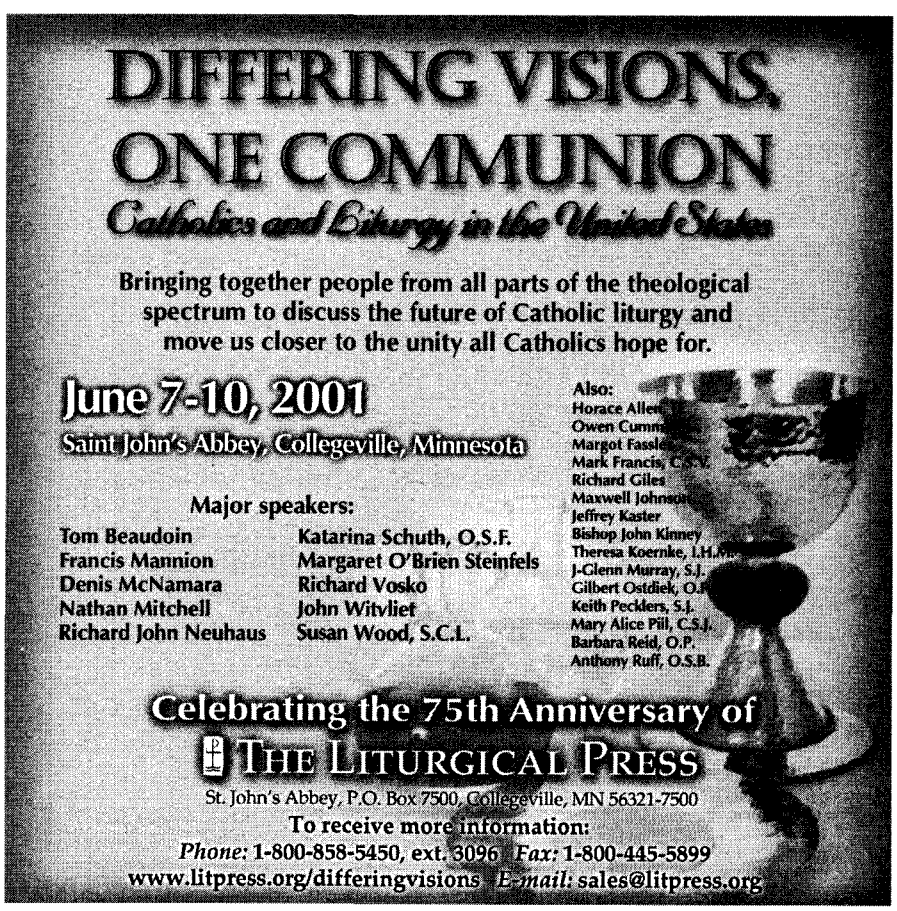
To many non-Catholics, especially religiously skeptical ones, belonging to Opus Dei means nothing more than being a high-octane Catholic of a certifiably orthodox sort. Whatever oddity they find in such membership being conjoined with treason is ultimately only a variation of the strangeness of Catholicism itself, or possibly of any religious belief at all.

To Catholics like myself, however, Opus Dei is hardly coterminous with Catholicism. Indeed, Opus Dei and similar groups often give the impression that liberal Catholicism barely qualifies as genuine Catholicism. So I must confess to some unchristian feelings of *schadenfreude* over Opus Dei's current public-relations nightmare.

Of course, Hanssen's motives are likely to have been greed, wounded professional pride, or the result of some darker psychological malady. Still, just as certain forms of liberalism may have provided fertile soil for Communist sympathies, something in the Manichaean worldview and hothouse atmosphere of groups like Opus Dei seems mirrored in Hanssen's alleged acts. If he fit into the organization with an ulterior motive, it looks like the fit was not a difficult or uncomfortable one. Hanssen's rigid piety and reactionary views remind us that the rejection of American democracy is as likely to come from the right as from the left these days.

Members of Opus Dei and similar groups are becoming more visible as the so-called "countercultural" agenda of Catholic conservatives becomes more influential in the church. In Rome, devotional zeal and organizational success seem to override concerns about authoritarian structures and cult-like attitudes. In 1992, Pope John Paul II beatified Opus Dei's charismatic founder, Josémaria Escrivá de Balaguer (1902–75). Escrivá founded the organization, called "the Work of God," in the 1930s in response to the disestablishment of the church in Spain. Long associated with Franco's government and with right-wing movements throughout Latin America, Opus Dei, its critics argue, is little more than the latest wrinkle in the old integrist dream of establishing an "organic" and wholly Catholic social and political order.

Hanssen is reported to have preferred the Latin Mass and to have kept to Opus Dei's ascetical routines. "The work," as the group's adherents call it, has taken the traditional pre-Vatican II devotional practices of a religious order like the Jesuits or Franciscans and adapted them for lay Catholics, including married couples—minus, of course, the public ac-



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knowledgment of living in a separate community and by a disciplinary rule. At the same time, worldly success is encouraged (it's called the sanctification of work), and Opus Dei is known for its recruitment of intellectual and social elites. Members lead a kind of double life; to the world, they are successful doctors or lawyers, distinguished only by their professional skills and autonomy; off the job they must not only engage in an intense life of prayer (all to the good) but be strictly accountable to those above them in "the work" (more problematic).

Perhaps it was this double-agent aura that appealed to Hanssen, whose career in law enforcement has been devoted to counterespionage of one sort or other. Professionally, he seems to have put great stock in his intellectual and moral superiority over those around him. Hanssen's contempt for the bungling of his fellow FBI and CIA agents seems to have been linked to his disdain for the godlessness, materialism, and sexual license of American society. Perhaps betraying what some insist is a "culture of death" to its atheistic enemy may not have caused as great a crisis of conscience as first appears. Both societies, Hanssen may have reasoned, are hopelessly corrupt. His ultimate allegiance was to a grander, purer truth far above the disorder of democratic politics.

But that's all speculation—we will probably never know the whole truth about Hanssen. What we do know is that Opus Dei is one of the more baroque alternatives embraced by those outraged by the loss of moral and spiritual discipline in both the church and society. Yes, something surely has been lost. But too much easy talk is now heard about the necessary connection between religious belief and moral virtue. There is no going back to a time when moral and religious beliefs were free from all ambiguity. Moreover, there is good reason to distrust any faith, whether secular or religious, that is held as single-mindedly and uncritically as some self-proclaimed "orthodox" Catholics now hold theirs. Whatever the courts decide about Hanssen, enough has surfaced to remind us that religion is no guarantee of morality; in too many cases, it's not even a good predictor. □

OF SEVERAL MINDS

E.J. DIONNE Jr.

TAX CUTS

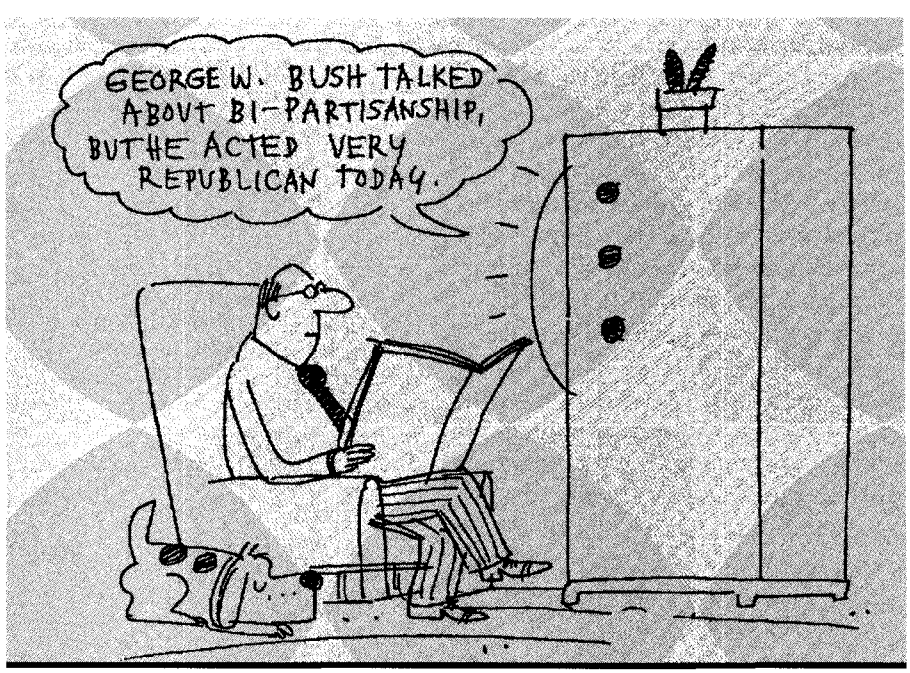
All the public policy Bush needs

When President Bush visited the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange earlier this month—the place where they trade pork bellies and all manner of other stuff, imaginable and unimaginable—his words sounded inevitable as soon as they were out of his mouth. Bush spoke of his joy at being in "entrepreneurial heaven" and declared: "The entrepreneurial spirit is what America is all about."

Now I know perfectly well that no politician should be taken too seriously when he uses the "this is what America is all about" formulation. Yet this is one of those statements that has the ring of truth. The business of the Bush administration really is business, and tax cuts are what this presidency is all about.

Bush has been rushing from state to state in an open effort to pressure Democrats to vote for his $1.6 trillion—or, if it's counted accurately, more likely $2.1 trillion to $2.6 trillion—tax bill as he's written it. It's hard to see a tax plan as embodying infallible truth, and yet Bush is insisting that any plan either bigger or smaller than his own will depart from some golden mean. Republicans in the House of Representatives have sped through a tax bill to keep up "the momentum," as if tax policy should be made the way party primaries are won. Bush's problem is that he's selling a plan that his allies see as not doing what it claims to do and that his enemies see as doing far too much. That's not a golden mean. That's the cost of policy on the fly.

One of the senators Bush hopes to sell on his plan is Tim Johnson, a South Dakota Democrat. Johnson is philosophical about Bush's visit to his state—it went for Bush by a large margin—and fully expects to hold out for a smaller and more targeted tax cut. What bothers Johnson is that Bush's plan was written in response not to the policy imperatives of 2001, but to the political imperatives of 2000: "He arrived at his number because of the importance of his primary and he had to get to the tax-cutting side



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of Steve Forbes." That would be the conservative businessman whom Bush once saw as the main threat for the Republican nomination.

Johnson is also bothered that Bush's bipartisan happy talk is belied by the bulldozer he's using to shove Democrats his way. "His approach clearly has not been bipartisan," Johnson says. "I don't think that's going over very well."

Well, you might ask, so what? If Bush gets this bill through, he's got a big victory. And if he has to settle for a smaller tax cut, he'll do what he did in Texas: Take whatever passes, embrace it—and, yes, declare victory.

But Bush's hard line will make that second strategy less workable. The more he insists that his is the one and only plan, the more difficult it will be for him to claim triumph when his bill is rewritten. And by importing to Washington the strategy of his Texas governorship—take a few big campaign promises and make them the only things his administration is about—he's creating the impression that what matters is not the actual policy, but the perception that he's won. Bush has excellent views on baseball, but public policy should not be the same sort of game.

That's why more attention should be paid to criticisms of the Bush plan coming from his conservative allies. Yes, there are tactical games going on here—if conservatives move right, Bush can then say he's in the center. But their objections are also substantive: If this tax cut is really about stimulating the economy, why put off so many of the rate reductions until after Bush's first term? Why not pass a tax cut for the next year or so, a period for which the revenue forecasts are reasonably accurate?

The conservatives are using this argument to make the tax cut bigger. In fact, they offer an excellent rationale for making it smaller, focusing the benefits on middle-class taxpayers who'll spend the money, and putting it into effect quickly. Then there would be no need for the fig leaf of "trigger" mechanisms—in theory, they'd void future tax cuts if the surpluses didn't materialize—that promise action by future Congresses. This, of course, would require Bush to change gears and accept that winning on his own terms is not the most important thing. But acknowledging that your own ideas are not necessarily the best ideas is what statesmanship is all about. □

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Thomas A. Shannon

THE HUMAN GENOME

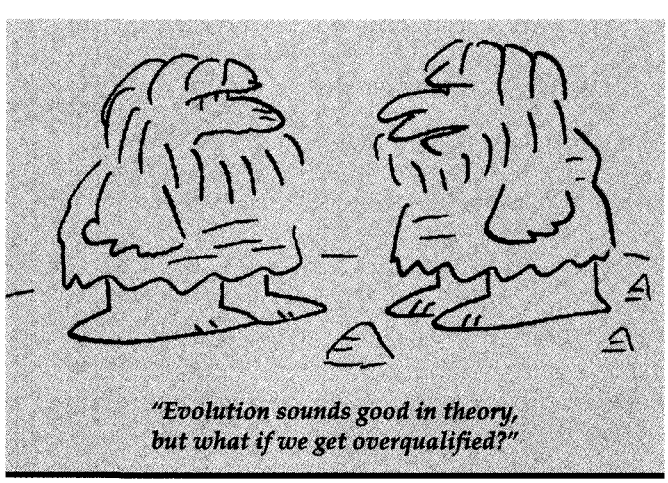
Now the hard work & the hard questions

The dramatic announcement last month of the final sequencing of the human genome by Celera Genomics, a private corporation, and the publicly funded International Human Genome Sequencing Consortium brought to an exhilarating conclusion decades of hard work and creative technological application. Now the really hard work begins. We now have a map of the genome but we need to figure out where to go with it and what to do when we get there. The ethical and social issues raised will be as daunting and complex as the technical ones.

The immediate findings raise significant questions. One discovery that shocked scientists is that the human genome consists of only about 30,000 genes, rather that the 100,000 to 200,000 previously anticipated. This finding gives humans only a slight numerical advantage over the fruit fly (with 13,000) and the roundworm (with 19,000 genes). What is more, the human genome trumps the mouse genome by a mere 300 genes, and we seem to have borrowed 113 genes from bacteria. While it has long been known that we differ from orangutans and similar primates by fewer that 1 percent of our genes, what is now so amazing is the incredible complexity created from so relatively few human genes.

This new discovery raises questions about traditional philosophical and theological understandings of humanity. It brings into sharp focus a paradigm shift that has been making its way through the culture since the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1856), a shift that began with the Copernican revolution. Not only has the earth been displaced from the center of the universe, humans have been dislodged as the apex of creation. It is clear we are just another species linked with many others by common origins. What the mapping of the human genome has done is put a final scientific stamp of approval on this Darwinian model: We come from and are related in the most intimate ways to all other life forms. The DNA giving rise to the earliest life forms is the very DNA that shows up in our genome. Indeed, we are the beneficiaries of this long, complex process of descent that has given rise to the almost infinite variety of life on Earth.

Additionally, the genome announcement makes it clear that species boundaries are not as sharply drawn as we once thought. Though there are clearly groupings of lifeforms in



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historical and environmentally stable forms, the genetics underneath are more fluid. What many thought to be fixed boundaries between species turn out to be, at best, semipermeable membranes. The many have indeed come from the one, and the source of this complexity is the wonderful combinations made possible by the four elemental letters of the genetic alphabet (A, C, G, T). Clearly, evolution combined with the new genetics requires a paradigm shift in how we think about ourselves.

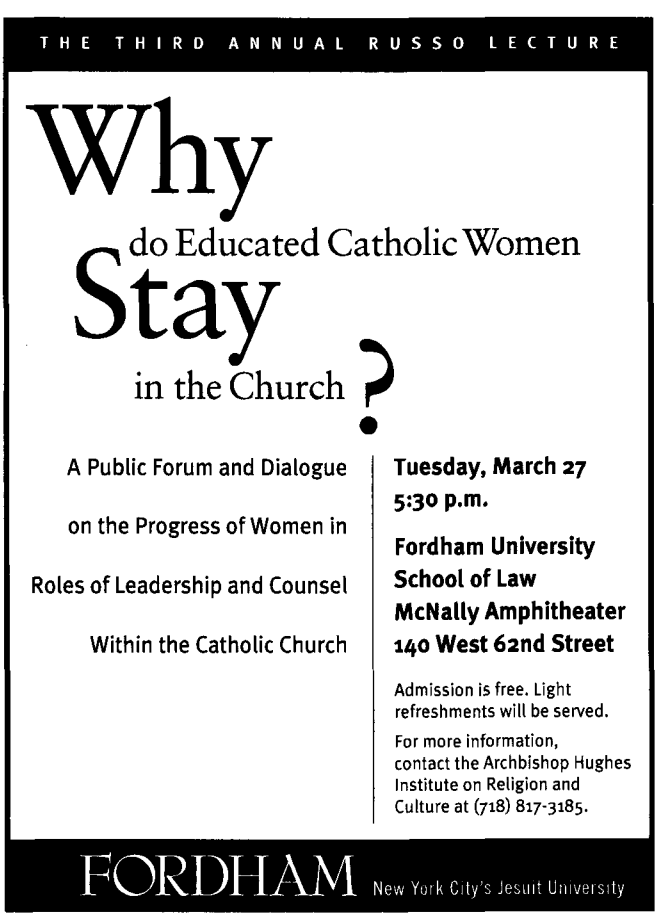
It is clear, for example, that we can no longer hold to a belief in a distinct creation of humans as presented by a literal reading of the first chapters of Genesis. Nor is it clear that we can trace our human origins to an original pair. Even though many are convinced of what is referred to as a mitochondrial Eve and a similar nucleotide Adam, these are statistical recognitions that at some point in the evolutionary process the group we understand as modern humans began to emerge in Africa, and that from this genetic pool we have all descended. We carry in our genome the record of this process, a record that is the source of our uniqueness and distinctness, but which also relates us to all other living organisms.

Some fear that acknowledging such an evolutionary process, as well as our commonness with other creatures, will necessarily lead to a loss of human dignity. They understand this dignity to be based on human uniqueness, which is a separate and distinct creation, and superiority over the other creatures as the steward of all creation. Now, however, we must rethink our dignity in light of our relatedness to the rest of creation.

Decades ago, Teilhard de Chardin described humans as "evolution become conscious of itself." This affirmed both our deep relatedness and also a differentiation. Thanks to the genome project, we now understand this evolutionary relatedness in a deeper way. But this relatedness includes a difference: our consciousness. Pope John Paul II, in a message delivered to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on October 22, 1996, provides grounding for what he calls an ontological leap. Clearly, the complexity of matter—witnessed in the ever-changing and adapting genome—issued as a species that has the amazing capacity not only to reflect on its origins but also to search for meaning. But this consciousness, while it differentiates us from other creatures, does not separate us from them. It is a transcendence from within, as opposed to a transcendence from without. The reality of our being "evolution become conscious of itself" underscores not only our dignity but our responsibility for being the voice or spokesperson of and for creation. Our dignity is therefore one of service, not of status.

The Christian tradition gives us resources to support this model of human dignity. Consider the wisdom tradition of Saint Bonaventure. Briefly stated, Bonaventure argued that each form of matter is ordered to the next higher form. Furthermore, he theorized that humans are located in the very center of creation, since they reconcile within themselves both matter and spirit. Finally, he believed that we represent all of creation before the throne of God as we recapitulate all the elements of creation in our bodies. Even though Bonaventure sees humanity as having the highest position in all of creation, such a position confers responsibility rather than power. Dignity is in service, not in position. A second resource is scriptural. In Matthew 20, Jesus announces that "the son of Man came not to be served, but to serve." In the context of a discussion about authority, Jesus' message is clear: Position confers not power but the obligations of care and responsibility.

The theological and perceptual problem is that we have historically identified human dignity as something conferred by a distinct creative act of God. We now realize that we—as all creation—have emerged from the fullness of the process initiated by God. This revised view can provide the basis for a different, much-needed ecological ethic, one that understands us as embedded in the created order which we nonetheless affect through our actions. This ethic will argue against a long-standing ethic of domination, one that is characteristic of our present attitude toward natural resources. The new revelations from the genome project, therefore, are not a threat to or a diminishment of human dignity. Rather, they provide us with the opportunity to rethink forgotten elements of our tradition. □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Thomas A. Shannon *is professor of religion and social ethics in the department of humanities and arts, Worcester Polytechnic Institute.*

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AVOIDING MORAL CHOICES

Call in the ethics expert

Gordon Marino

It does not require an expert to see that we are living in era of highly bureaucratized knowledge, a time that more than one pundit has described as "an age of experts." We have experts on everything—inter- and intrapsychic life, gender equity, child rearing, child violence, sex, marriage, diversity, dying/grief, leadership, you name it. The notion that where there is a problem there must be a professional listing in the Yellow Pages has become so ingrained that when it comes to a wide swath of issues, we almost instinctively defer judgment to one of the mandarin class, that is, to people who make their living by purveying one form or other of highly specialized knowledge. In the late twentieth century a new group of knowledge providers entered the ranks of experts, namely, professional ethicists.

Every culture has its own resources for responding to moral problems. The moral resources of the West derive from Jerusalem and Athens in the form of the Judeo-Christian faith and Greek philosophy which, on account of Paul's attempts to convert the Greeks, left its impress upon the content of the Christian faith. Until quite recently, those seeking moral counsel could only go to the clergy, who were sometimes referred to as "directors of conscience." Moral direction was almost always connected with faith and the acceptance of religious authority, which is itself based on the mystical phenomenon of divine prophecy and revelation. With the Enlightenment, however, came a fervent attempt to found moral theory and much else on the pedestal of human reason alone. Secular moralists canonized the ethics of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Mill, and others. And yet, until the age of experts, ethical issues were not thought of as separable from the warp and woof of the practices of everyday life. The baker, the candlestick maker, and the physician each faced moral problems in the practice of his craft that he was expected to resolve by his own moral lights. In the late twentieth century, though, moral quandaries have become fare for the ethics expert.

Ethicists are, for the most part, lawyers or doctors of philosophy who have taken special training in ethical theory and its application to concrete situations in the professions. Professional moralists entered the ranks of the expert class in the late sixties. At that time, dramatic advances in medical technology, such as the development of the respirator, dialysis, and transplant surgery, raised a host of biting moral questions which philosophers were better suited to answer than physicians. Issues about personal identity loomed up. As people were kept alive much longer by artificial means, the questions emerged, What exactly are the limits of life? When is a person dead? Questions about distributive justice also came to the fore. Who, after all, should be saved when the need for a new life-saving technology is greater than the supply? While historians agree that technological advances ignited the bioethics trade, Henry Beecher's 1996 whistleblowing article, "Ethics and Clinical Research," published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, gave the decision impetus. Beecher, himself a physician, detailed the routine abuses of human research subjects in medical experiments. These breaches of public and private trust included injecting live cancer cells into unwitting patients and infusing mentally defective inmates with hepatitis virus and then testing different treatment modalities. When read against the backdrop of the heinous work of the Nazi doctors (who, as Robert Jay Lifton has shown, marshaled their own bioethical justifications), Beecher's courageous essay left us less inclined than ever to leave physicians in the quietude of their morally privileged position.

About thirty years ago, a stranger, who was not a medical practitioner, began to appear at the bedside of the sick. That stranger was the first ethics expert, a bioethicist. Today, whenever there is a severe conflict between the hospital and

"How was I supposed to know what your community standards are?"

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a patient or patient's family over treatment, this stranger is summoned to resolve it. Bioethicists are also called to speak our collective mind whenever there are public-policy questions such as: Should we cultivate embryos for research? Or, What is a just method of distributing organs to transplant candidates? Ethics experts are, however, no longer restricted to the biomedical professions.

Watergate and the corporate scandals of the eighties prompted some to see that medicine was not the only market for people with special training in ethics. In the beginning of the new millennium, we find professional ethicists standing in the corner and giving directions to many professions. Business ethics is a billion-dollar-a-year industry. Ethicists are hired by corporations to develop workshops, handle whistle-blowing incidents, write value statements, and in general to function as ancillary superegos to executives highly focused on making money. For almost any given area of expertise, there is today another area of expertise called "the ethics of" that area of expertise. As a triple-click onto the Internet will attest, there are thousands of ethicists offering consultations on the moral questions specific to computers, sports, law, media, engineering, organization, and myriad other fields. Some ethicists call themselves "religious ethicists." Unlike their secular brethren, they claim, in theory at least, to treat as sacral the assumptions of their sacred texts. However, most ethicists are committed to trying to decide moral questions in "neutral" terms.

Freud, to whom the whole new class of experts owes an unacknowledged debt, knew that if you are going to legitimize a field of study you need institutions and journals devoted to that field of study. Into the late seventies there were but a handful of ethics institutes. Now it seems nearly every university and college boasts some kind of ethics center. The Association for Practical and Professional Ethics alone lists more than eighty institutional members. For a sampler of ethics think tanks, Dartmouth has its Institute for the Study of Applied and Professional Ethics; the University of Virginia has the Olsson Center for Applied Ethics; California State University hosts the Kegley Institute of Ethics; Ohio University sponsors the Institute for Applied and Professional Ethics; Santa Clara University is home to the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. Ethics groups unaffiliated with postsecondary institutions are also multiplying. For example, last year I spent a couple of weeks in the coastal village of Camden, Maine, home of the free-floating Institute for Global Ethics. Over the past two decades, scores of specialized ethics journals have come into existence, many of which are the children of ethics institutes.

The service-oriented American economy has produced an almost fetishistic appetite for experts. In my nonexpert opinion, it is one thing to consult an expert for help with marital problems or with getting your child to do his homework; it is another, graver matter to begin handing over questions of right and wrong to a moral cognoscenti. And this is precisely what we have begun to do. The ethics doyens at the National Institutes of Health and other places are already occupied answering some of the definitive moral questions of our age, such as questions concerning cloning and stem-cell research.

But by what authority do ethics experts presume to speak? As Philip Rieff has observed, the very question of the legitimacy and limitations of the expert might well be understood as one aspect of the modern problem of authority. Oddly enough, ethicists do not pretend that their training in moral theory renders them more virtuous than their clients. It is not easy to gather ethics experts under the same conceptual umbrella; however, most of them do see themselves as possessing a special knowledge by virtue of which they can speak with authority on moral matters. But are ethicists kidding themselves and us? Is ethics a subject matter like medicine or physics about which one can become an expert? Or, are the claims to expertise in ethics spurious?

Philosophically speaking, we have been through this story before. In golden-age Athens there were teachers, namely, "the sophists," who claimed to be experts on ethics. For rather substantial fees, the sophists offered to impart their moral knowledge to the children of wealthy Athenians. Though he vehemently denied the charges, Socrates, who was executed in 399 B.C., was accused of being one of those ethics experts. In the trial of Socrates, as described by Plato, the oracle at Delphi proclaimed that there is no one wiser than Socrates. Befuddled by this pronouncement, Socrates attempted to find someone wiser than he. He cross-examined representatives from a wide swath of Athenian society. According to Plato's text, the first gospel of Western philosophy, Socrates eventually came to understand that he was the wisest person in Athens by virtue of the fact that he alone knew that he was ignorant. Socrates concluded that the ethics experts of his time were impostors, or to be more precise, that they were flatterers who had a knack for telling affluent Athenians just what they wanted to hear. Does the judgment that Socrates passed upon the ethics experts of fourth-century Athens apply to the legion of ethics experts in contemporary America and Western Europe?

Though it was to the philosophical mind that the idea of ethics experts first occurred, there are key figures in the philosophical pantheon who would seem to frown on the ethics trade. Aristotle, for example, would be the last one to ring up for an ethics consult. For Aristotle, those in need of moral counsel would be best advised to seek out the most virtuous person they could find. According to Aristotle, moral percipience is a function of moral character, and character of proper habits derived from imitating virtuous deeds. It is the virtuous individual, and not necessarily the scholar who has been studying ethical case histories, who will have the most acute moral sensibilities. Indeed, were Aristotle to put together an ethics committee, it would probably be composed of the likes of Jesus, Socrates, Bonhoeffer, Gandhi, King, Mother Teresa, and other moral paragons. Perhaps it says something about the level of morality desired, but moral

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heroes are seldom sought after to sit on ethics panels. Discussing the question of expertise in ethics with a philosopher from Moscow, I once suggested that as an alternative to panels of people expert at parsing out arguments, we assemble a core group of moral champions. The philosopher laughed and said that they had tried such panels in Russia only to find that uncompromising moralists could not compromise enough to come to any decisions together.

Ironically, many ethicists describe themselves as followers of Immanuel Kant, the eighteenth-century German moral philosopher. Kant is a complicated kettle of fish. But one thing is certain, he believed the knowledge of good and evil to be universally distributed. If moral knowledge were not universally distributed and the horde of us stood in need of experts to teach us right from wrong, then those of us who were moral laypersons would be ignorant of our duties and therefore morally inculpable. For I cannot have moral obligations of which I am unaware. But Kant assures us that we are all morally culpable, or to put it in the patois of the present age, that we must all "take responsibility" for our actions. While Kant would agree that we need an expert to decide on the right course of medical treatment for grandmother's cancer, we do not need an expert to decide on the morality of taking someone off life support.

Søren Kierkegaard and other masters of suspicion in the Christian tradition would scoff at the idea of ethics experts.

Søren Kierkegaard and other masters of suspicion in the Christian tradition would scoff at the idea of ethics experts. Like Kant, Kierkegaard believed that we all know right from wrong, but as he put it, "we work our whole lives at eclipsing our ethico-religious knowledge," that is, at talking ourselves out of what we know. Why? Because the individual who listens to his conscience will often find himself marching against the orders of his desire for happiness. Telling your boss the truth may be the right thing to do, but it could cost you your job. For Kierkegaard, the only expert of moral moment would be one who could help us resist the self-deceptive tendency to take the easy way by dishonestly identifying it as the righteous way. In some circles, ethics experts are infamous for just this kind of psychological legerdemain. For example, in his scathing critique of professional ethics, Raymond Gaita notes that ethicists congratulate themselves for being able to ponder moral possibilities that they themselves previously judged to be beyond the pale, such as infanticide.

There are other arguments that can be mustered against the very idea of expertise in ethics. The philosophers David Hume and Arthur Schopenhauer, to say nothing of the contemporary evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson, all hold that morality is based on feeling. According to this tradition, if you have sympathy for others you will probably behave morally, if not, then not. But if morality is based on feeling, the capacity for which I either inherit and/or learn, then what good is the hair splitting that is the stock and trade of ethics experts?

Over the last decade, histories of the bioethics trade, some of them critical, have begun to appear. Some of the skepticism about professional ethics expressed in these studies derives from the fact that for expert and nonexpert alike, all moral reasoning is based on assumptions that, in the end, cannot be justified against competing assumptions. In their practice, ethicists are given cases to analyze and judge. Here's an example. A depressed septuagenarian with terminal cancer wants to stop all treatment. Should he be allowed to, or should his depression be regarded as rendering him incompetent to make such decisions? The conclusion drawn will depend not only on how you understand depression, but also on your foundational notions of right and wrong. The ethics expert with a Kantian orientation will argue that the man should be allowed to die, since for Kantians there is nothing more important than respecting the autonomy of the individual. The utilitarian expert, whose dictum is to do that which produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people, might surmise that everyone, family and medical staff included, would be best served if the man were not allowed to discontinue treatment. One expert begins with the premise that there is nothing more important than preserving human autonomy, another that all decisions ought to maximize happiness, still another, the Christian ethicist, that we ought to track our moral vectors from the Bible, and still another, the feminist, that the essential point is that we be guided by a caring attitude.

In short, all moral reasoning, expert and nonexpert alike, is based on assumptions. It is the recognition of just this fact that converts many undergraduates into relativists. Although ethicists may have extraordinary acumen in the dissection of moral problems, they do not deduce their recommendations from a set of incontrovertible principles absorbed in the course of their doctoral studies in ethics. Inasmuch as all our moral reasoning is guided by assumptions, we are all flying by the seat of our moral pants.

Ethics experts often disagree with one another. Give a hundred physicists the same straightforward problem and they will respond with roughly a hundred similar answers. If ethics constitutes a body of knowledge, then you might expect ethics experts to offer similar responses to the same straightforward problem. There is, however, much disparity in expert opinion in ethics. Indeed, in a study published in the *Journal of Clinical Ethics*, 144 ethicists were given a very straightforward and common hypothetical problem as to whether or not to remove life support from a patient in a vegetative state. Expert counsel was all over the board. But

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if experts disagree in their answers to relatively simple problems, how are we to distinguish between expert and non-expert opinion?

One ethicist who directs a prominent ethics institute responds to the problem of the diversity of expert opinion by claiming that there are only a handful of people qualified to call themselves ethicists and within this select group there is in fact much consensus. The question of the proper criteria for establishing legitimacy is an urgent one among ethicists. While there are numerous graduate programs in applied ethics, there is currently no universally recognized credentialling procedure. And it is no wonder, as it is difficult to imagine what the qualifying exam for ethics experts might look like.

Not surprisingly, most experts agree that the lack of consensus among ethics experts is no argument against professional ethics. The director of one ethics institute rightly explains that the divergence of expert counsel is an understandable reflection of two factors: a difference of opinion about projected outcomes and a difference of basic premises. If one ethicist believes that the development of cloning procedures will lead to eugenics and another does not, then it should come as no surprise that the two will disagree as to whether or not cloning should be allowed. Philosophers working in the trenches of applied ethics will tell you that there is no more diversity of expert opinion in ethics than there is in, say, economics. An important difference, however, might be that economic theories generate predictions which either confirm or deny the theories. It is hard to fathom what consequences would confirm a bioethicist's recommendations for stem-cell research.

Ethicists of the biomedical stripe sometimes defend their turf by arguing that science and technology are developing far ahead of our moral sensibilities. Those with strong personal interests often do a poor job of policing the practices that have to do with those interests. Scientists may not be the best people to set the moral parameters of the technologies that they have invented. If you are looking for a person to develop a protocol for the just distribution of organ donations, you do not want to ask someone in need of a transplant. One precept that people of different ethical persuasions agree to is the notion that fair judgment is best served by disinterested individuals. The very notion of the ethics expert is formed around the idea that in the professional ethicist we have someone who is both trained in ethical reasoning and relatively free of interest in the issue that he is charged with reasoning about.

However, critics of the ethics guild complain that ethicists have become just that, a guild with their own class interests. Indeed, Leon Kass, one of the proto-ethicists at the Hastings Center, the most influential ethics think tank in the world, noted in a retrospective piece that whereas bioethics started as a discipline that challenged many established beliefs, it is now itself in danger of becoming the establishment. Not only do ethicists fail to press bedrock questions about the society in which they are fast becoming the new clergy; they are often in the pockets of the hospitals and corporations that employ them. It is here important to remember that ethicists considered as a group are vocationally challenged. About half of them have graduate degrees in philosophy or religion. The job market in these fields is only a little stronger than the market for slide rules. When a hospital or healthcare provider offers a three-thousand-dollar consultation fee on a case involving a dispute with a patient's family, there is considerable pressure for the ethicist who wishes to secure further employment to come to a moral conclusion consonant with that of his employers. The image of the ethicist as a disinterested moral observer is not a convincing one.

It could, I suppose, be reasoned that the authority of professional ethicist is grounded in an extraordinary ability to illuminate ethical issues. Reluctant as I am to call upon my own experience, I must acknowledge that I have seldom if ever come away from reading an ethics case history with the sense, "Now, I see why they call some people experts on ethics." In the process of writing this article, I approached a number of business ethicists asking them to provide me with vignettes illustrative of the good works of ethics consultants. Surprisingly, they were rather reticent. Eventually, one proudly confided that he had made a positive intervention in a brewing gender equity issue. A financial consulting firm that was having a problem because their male associates had a practice of taking their male clients to gentlemen's clubs. The female associates were becoming disgruntled because their male clients were transferring their accounts over to their male counterparts. The clouds of a court proceeding were forming. Enter the ethics expert, who sagaciously counseled the company executive to put a halt to the practice of entertaining clients at strip joints. Many of the interventions of ethics experts ring as flat-footed common sense supporting the Kantian claim that moral knowledge is universally distributed in the form of conscience.

There are many arguments for being wary of the claims of ethics experts. But life is not an argument. The Freudian or psychodynamic model of the self was toppled not by research and counterarguments but rather by the growing reluctance of insurance companies to pay for long-term psychotherapy. The fate of professional ethics will be determined by the fate of the institutions in which ethicists have become embedded.

And, in truth, it is not as though there were an essence of "ethics" and an essence of "experts" so that it could be definitively demonstrated that the idea of an ethics expert is a contradiction in terms. As that great deflator of metaphysical questions, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, taught us, the meaning of a term is fixed by the community that uses it. If we choose to relate to a class of academics as ethics experts, then there are ethics experts. There are worse fates. Professional ethicists have done some good. In the medical field, it is the ethics maestros who have made sure that people undergoing surgery or participating in experiments give

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their informed consent. Once again, when you are in the jaws of the golem that is the modern hospital, where one stranger of a doctor passes you off to another stranger of a doctor and miscommunications abound, the ethicist is now the best person to turn to for protection. And while it is true that the corporate world has embraced ethicists for financial rather than ethical reasons, most of the businesses in which ethicists have found a niche are, ethically speaking, better off for their presence. Arguments or no, the influence of professional ethicists will continue to expand. Ethicists are, after all, part of the growing cadre of lifestyle engineers, people who make their daily bread by teaching us how to relate to others and to ourselves. While I harbor no illusions about dismantling the ethics establishment, a concluding caveat is in order.

Sociologists maintain that through the process of specialization, nonspecialist come to lose faith in their own opinions. As this process goes, the very existence of a recognized guild of child-rearing experts will undermine the nonexpert's confidence. Neil Postman observes that with the emergence of the cult of the expert, we, the nonexperts, have commenced to talk ourselves out of much of our common stock of knowledge. As early as the sixties, James Ackerman recognized the rising tide of self-doubt: "If one's position in society implies no determinate base of judgment in areas outside of one's competence, one has a choice between having no opinion or accepting the opinion of the expert, and the most available expert is the professional manufacturer of opinion."

...the fantasy that you need a doctorate in ethics to determine right from wrong encourages nonexperts to believe that ethics is an extremely complicated matter and so we should take a wait-and-see attitude toward our moral intuitions.

It would be a moral blight for us to begin to take our own moral convictions with a grain of salt, as though they were the innocent musings of a nonspecialist, akin to someone not trained in medicine speculating about the origins of a disease. Freud went a long way toward breaking the spell of conscience by pointing out the primitive and unconscious forces that are the source of our moral inner voice. Accepting the idea that the voice of nonexpert conscience is the voice of an uneducated dolt would further undermine our individual sense of moral responsibility. As Anne McClean points out in her rigorously argued critique of the ethics industry, *The Elimination of Morality* (Routledge, 1993), one of the dangers of the professional ethics movement is that a diffident public could easily come to confuse the voice of reason with the voice of ethics experts. And as Ackerman and others point out, the public is becoming increasingly diffident.

The public is also developing a taste for ethics gurus. The *New York Times Magazine* now features a regular column, "The Ethicist." Readers send in moral quandaries such as, "I have twice told my bank that it has over-credited my account. What should I do?" As straightforwardly as a financial counselor, the ethics expert tells them. We must hope that people submitting such queries do not imagine that having received their responses they, the moral laypersons, are henceforth absolved from the responsibility of thinking about the matters at hand.

It is tempting to believe that scholars steeped in the theory of morals and its application could provide us with a semblance of moral certitude, especially when these scholars do not, à la other more prophetic moralists, demand that we turn our lives upside down and give everything to the poor. Ethicists can illuminate conflicting moral interests. They can rehearse the reasons for holding one moral position as opposed to another and can often provide the best arguments for their moral positions; but, for all their acumen in catching out fallacious moral reasoning, ethics experts do not enjoy a privileged relation to the moral truth. They do not bear the relation to their subject matter that physicists bear to physics or for that matter that physicians bear to medical science. As earlier noted, ethicists are currently carving out moral guidelines for cloning, stem-cell research, the distribution of organs for transplant, and other weighty matters. It would be an act of self-deception on our part to pretend that we cannot be morally wrong for enacting a policy that had received the imprimatur of a committee of ethics experts.

And yet there are strong psychological motives for wanting to recuse ourselves from moral decisions. For one obvious reason, it diminishes our own sense of responsibility and guilt. More than that, the fantasy that you need a doctorate in ethics to determine right from wrong encourages nonexperts to believe that ethics is an extremely complicated matter and so we should take a wait-and-see attitude toward our moral intuitions. Before obeying the inner voice that commands me to take more time away from my own private projects to help those less fortunate, I ought to let some time pass and think about it, for after all, ethics is a complicated matter; otherwise, there would not be so many experts on the topic. Kierkegaard taught that we should do what we take to be the right thing now, for the longer we wait the more likely it is that we will talk ourselves out of acting by convincing ourselves that the wide way is the righteous way. It may be that moral matters are more complicated than that complicated Dane envisioned; nevertheless, the image of ethics conjured by the acceptance of an ethical establishment tempts some of our worst impulses. □

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Rand Richards Cooper

TRAGEDY IN TWO GENDERS

'The House of Mirth' & 'The Pledge'

Part way through Terence Davies's lavish, bitter *The House of Mirth* comes a fabulous movie kiss. Edith Wharton's icy 1905 manners-and-morals satire of New York's moneyed aristocracy pairs Lily Bart, a society girl dependent on her rich aunt, with Lawrence Selden, a charming but impecunious gentleman lawyer. Desire crackles between the two, but, alas, both need to marry well; they're the handsome social assets waiting to be fetched up by rich partners, and when they slip away from a party to trade cigarettes and reckless endearments, their kiss is all the more passionate for defying the iron laws of marital economy. Critics have noted the similarity of Wharton's money-obsessed era to our own. But today's trophy wives are less Lily Bart than Playmate types, today's merger marriages less tragic than comic: a raucous free-for-all where everyone grabs what can be had, then calls in the lawyers. Wharton's vision was bleaker by far, since the rigid code of female reputation was absolute, and a woman who lost hers, as Lily ultimately does, faced an irreversible drop in her stock. As Lily veers toward oblivion—cast out of society, forced ultimately to do piecework in a milliner's sweatshop—*The House of Mirth* becomes a lurid nightmare of poverty, with downward mobility a fate worse than death.

Davies's adaptation captures both the formality of Wharton's language and settings and her novel's relentless fatalism. *The House of Mirth* turns American belle époque opulence (the film was actually shot at several Victorian mansions in Scotland) into images of imprisonment and humiliation: Lily in fur-collared dresses festooned with brooches; Lily fitted out in veils and parasols like a doll, copiously decorated and framed—framed literally at one point, posing in a grotesque living tableau of a John Singer Sargent portrait. As the suffering heroine, Gillian Anderson—Agent Scully to millions of "X-Files" fans—provides a lesson in how quickly a good actress can free herself from her TV persona, deftly playing the range of Lily's emotions, from coy teasing and a panting, flushed arousal (that kiss!) to histrionic outrage, and finally a zombie-like submissiveness as she sleepwalks toward her demise.

Looking for a husband

Wharton's furious attack on the values of the market was launched from deep within the master class, and a century later the tragic plight of the upper-class woman may be lost to audiences that can't but wonder how much harder Lily's working-class sister milliners have it. The quiet formality of Davies's film may also prove a reach for some—accustomed, as we are, to conflating anger with shouting and violence with punching. But there's no missing Wharton's wrath at the dependent status of women, with honor as their only currency—a currency ever vulnerable to the manipulations of men. Though written in the twentieth century, *The House of Mirth* shows a nineteenth-century novelist's belief in fixed laws of nature and society, with human behavior suspended, as Balzac wrote, between two motives, *l'amour* and *l'ambition*. Wharton's bleak vision discloses the latter remorselessly crushing the former; and a rising note of Victorian melodrama betrays the fury lurking beneath her decorous and opulent surfaces.

Sean Penn's *The Pledge* lets us know life's no picnic for men, either. The threat here is not too much society, but too little—the snowbound reaches of the American West a blank canvas on which Penn scratches out a scrawl of male isolation. Jack Nicholson plays Jerry Black, a famed Reno detective being ushered into retirement by younger colleagues semisecretly relieved to see the old fart go. But not so fast. In the middle of Jerry's retirement party, news comes of a girl's brutally violated body discovered in woods outside town. Jerry insists on joining the investigation—he hasn't retired yet, he reminds his captain—and a few hours later, breaking the horrific news to the girl's parents, he promises he'll find the killer. At first it seems that won't take much. A suspect is quickly apprehended, a mentally impaired Indian (Benicio Del Toro) with a criminal record.

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Jerry watches a macho younger detective (Aaron Eckhardt, fast becoming a specialist in pathologic maleness) extort a dubious confession—after which the suspect wrests a gun from an officer and kills himself. Case closed. But Jerry is not convinced. Cancel that fishing trip.

With a setup this familiar, we're always a step ahead: the little girl who tells Jerry, ominously, that her dead playmate had befriended "a wizard" with a big black car; the revelation of similar, unsolved crimes the Indian couldn't have committed; the colleagues annoyed at Jerry's refusal to disappear ("You want me to open the case because you've got a hunch?"). But Penn takes this stale material and makes it fresh, largely by paying less attention to his plot than to Jerry's obsession with the case. We see Jerry returning months later to the crime scene, now a lovely green meadow, not knowing why he's there, except that he made a promise. He's haunted, we understand, by mistakes made in the past, and by the grim darkness of aging and obsolescence ahead. A relationship develops with Lori (Robin Wright Penn), a hard-bitten barmaid and single mom out in the boondocks where Jerry, following a hunch about the true murderer's modus operandi, buys a run-down gas station and settles in. When Lori shows up one night, battered by her ex-husband, Jerry takes her and her daughter in to stay with him—no conditions, he insists. Again, we see their intimacy coming all the way, yet it's deeply moving nonetheless. So lonely is director Penn's view of life, so bereft of solace, that when people find one another it's with a rush of embarrassed gratitude. We're surprised, and moved as well, because they are.

For a thriller, *The Pledge* is unusually low-key. Slow-motion shots—a pink balloon floating away, a girl in a red dress on a swing—boost the sense of dreamlike obsession and suspense, and Chris Menges's camera writes visual tone poems of isolation: an empty country bridge, wisps of fog in a valley, the endless fields of snow. These images of rural loneliness reveal Penn's brand of brooding, harsh romanticism, a romanticism stripped of the sublime—fixed on nature's capacity not to exhilarate but to annihilate, either swiftly, by killing, or slowly, by decrepitude and despair.

I've wondered about Jack Nicholson's ability to play roles without a leering, campy edge of the insane. But *The Pledge* nicely dampens this tendency to exaggeration, and Nicholson's drowsy, heavy-lidded expression delivers quiet interior moments of a kind rare in his performances—as when, glancing out the window as he packs up his office, he watches an old person using a walker in the street below. Vanessa Redgrave, as the murdered girl's grieving grandmother, and Mickey Rourke, as a janitor undone by the disappearance of his young daughter, serve up wrenching cameo portrayals of grief. And with not only Nicholson and Rourke on hand, but Sam Shepard and Harry Dean Stanton as well, Penn gives free rein to his fascination with fallen men—sinners whose lonely, despairing toughness lies one step short of madness. His vision of maleness has been compared to a train wreck, but to me it seems more desert island (has any film this male directed ever had women in the audience weeping?). Two-thirds of the way through, I thought Penn might let the plot slip away altogether—forget the serial-killer drama, and leave Jerry and Lori stunned by happiness in their new life. But no. So determined is Penn to have everything whirl away into the vortex of male obsession that he rams through a grim and ironic turn of events, and it's all attitude—a strutting nihilism that comes off as far cheaper than the movie itself.

The Pledge is that rare thing, a Hollywood movie that deserved a happier ending. And while nothing could seem farther from the intrigues of late Gilded Age Fifth Avenue than a murder thriller in remote Nevada, Sean Penn and Edith Wharton actually have a lot in common. Both take their heroes and hurl them into an abyss, riding an implacable determinism to a dark place where sympathy and rage become one. □

MEDIA

Celia Wren

MUDDLED ROAD TO GLORY

HBO's 'Boycott'

Don't believe what you read, and only half of what you hear," a rumor-wary civil rights activist cautions in *Boycott*, HBO's commendable new film (televised throughout March) about the 1955–56 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. Suspect what you see, too.

The creators of *Boycott* are only too aware that a straightforward narrative about this seminal moment in American history—an episode set in motion when Rosa Parks defied "Whites Only" seating in a Montgomery public bus—could allow viewers to luxuriate in moral superiority, congratulating themselves on the knowledge that Racism Is Wrong. To steer clear of this hazard, director Clark Johnson and his collaborators have opted to veer back and forth between disparate filmic formats—historical footage, mock home-movie segments, imitation newsreel excerpts, wobbly documentary-style hand-held camera work, etc.—so that the audience, continually forced to process visual information, can never relax into passivity.

One moment, for example, we are watching a full-color scene in basic feature-film mode: Parks (Iris Little-Thomas) greeting friends as she walks nervously out of the county courthouse. An instant later, we find ourselves contemplating a snippet of black-and-white interview—a thuggish white Alabaman who stares straight at the camera, cigarette dangling from his lip, and announces, "Folks just gonna have to get smart and join the Klan!" This alarming juxtaposition points out, and none too subtly, that we can't accept anything at face value. Every scene in *Boycott* represents a different some-

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Cinéma vérité and then some

one's point of view, and probably someone's prejudices.

"There are many different perspectives in any issue," director Johnson has remarked in justification of *Boycott*'s schizophrenic visuals, "and the film represents that by allowing the viewer to observe the process from the inside and hear directly from the people involved." In fact, at some points in the movie the different perspectives surge so abruptly into view and with such frenzy that Johnson and his creative team, rather than the civil rights movement itself, threaten to take center stage.

More than compensating for such overzealous photographic legerdemain is *Boycott*'s canny depiction of the backstage maneuvering that swept the Montgomery boycott to a triumphant conclusion after 381 days. In order to rally the entire black community behind the protest, while presenting a united front in negotiations with the city council, civil rights leaders had to come up with clear-cut goals and strategies. Should they pose modest demands—asking, for example, for more respectful attitudes from white bus drivers—in the hope of reaching an agreement with the white authorities? Or should they be more ambitious, shunning compromise (as Parks does when she refuses to pay a $10 court fine) in hope of challenging discrimination on a national level? As Martin Luther King Jr. (Jeffrey Wright) and the others thrash such issues out in heated but meandering meetings in churches and living rooms, the camera swerves and wobbles in classic cinéma vérité style, effectively planting us in the thick of the bickering groups. The visual technique emphasizes that great achievements don't spring into existence fully fledged with greatness; they grow out of life's mundane, muddling debates, and out of feats of patience.

Even heroic vision can ripen in such circumstances. *Boycott* points out that fact by dovetailing moments of group wrangling with shots of King drafting sermons in his study or explaining his position to his wife, Coretta (the glamorous Carmen Ejogo). As the legendary minister, whose quiet intensity when out of the pulpit differs strikingly from his thundering tones when he is in it, Wright anchors the film, hyperventilating photography and all. It's a performance that's all the more enthralling for being understated. As King begins to place the Montgomery events in the context of a broader civil rights movement, you can't but be intrigued, because his thought is evolving in a psychological place you can't quite fathom. And when he calmly wins a pool game against two swaggering youths in a nightclub, you're inclined to agree with them that he "must have had some divine help."

The scene in the nightclub is one of several pointing to an interesting contrast the filmmakers probably didn't intend. King visits the club in an attempt to squelch a false rumor about the boycott's demise; the way to "spread the word," as he observes to his fellow activists, is to get out in the field and *talk*. And throughout *Boycott*, the spoken word—fiery sermons, endless phone calls, boisterous meetings, pointed exchanges over the pool table—is the crucial medium for spreading information and disseminating values. It is no accident that when the effete, elegant activist and journalist Bayard Rustin (Erik Todd Dellums) shows up on the Kings' doorstep, the metaphor he uses to describe the boycott is an auditory one: "Mass action and black social gospel—it's a new form of protest. It's Negro. It's *jazz*!"

At the same time, with its potpourri of cinematic formats, the film continually reminds us of that truism oft bandied about these days: that we are a culture fixated upon the visual image. We've become so accustomed to decoding photographic clues, for example, that bobbing cinéma vérité-type footage has become a cliché: when the camera wobbles, as it does 70 percent of the time in *Boycott*, we know the scene is striving for *authenticity*. Meaning comes tangled up in the visual tricks we've learned from television and film.

Similarly, when *Boycott* interposes mock interview segments—like the "Get smart and join the Klan" cameo—it is nodding to the modern tendency to think of truth as relative. The film doesn't really voice the "many different perspectives" director Johnson has referred to; the interview snippets surface and disappear too quickly. As a result, one feels that the filmmakers are making a perfunctory effort to acknowledge multiple viewpoints mostly because that's the politically correct thing to do. By making the gesture in such a visually flashy manner, *Boycott* draws our attention to that PC mentality. And by veering back and forth between cinematic styles, the film reminds us of our short attention span and our desire for unflagging visual stimulation. Watching the movie, in other words, we are really watching ourselves. □

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Saint Paul & Saint Vincent

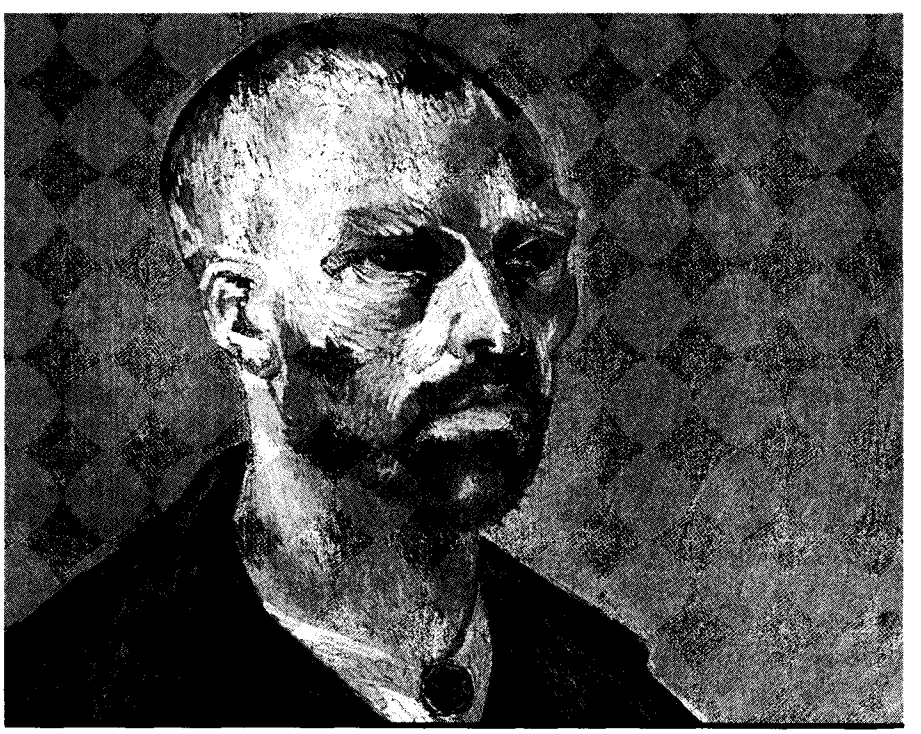
Van Gogh and Gauguin
The Search for Sacred Art
Deborah Silverman
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $60, 494 pp.

Donna Gustafson

Deborah Silverman's intelligent new book, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art*, asserts the importance of the Christian church in the development of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art by investigating the religious underpinnings of two of modernism's most venerated figures. Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) and Vincent van Gogh (1853–90) are the star-crossed partners of late-nineteenth-century modernism. Meeting in Paris, both sought to advance beyond realism to a realm of symbolic representation. Gauguin went first to Brittany, then Tahiti, in search of inspiration; van Gogh went south to Arles in search of the sun where he dreamed of a brotherhood of artists with Gauguin at the helm. Gauguin, whose economic difficulties were overwhelming, was invited to join Vincent in Arles where from October to December 1888, the two artists shared living space, painting and arguing about what and how to paint. Finally, in a dramatic explosion following a violent argument with Gauguin, van Gogh cut off part of his ear and delivered it to a prostitute. As Silverman convincingly argues, the collision of these two artistic visions is also a collision of religious and social beliefs.

Choosing the months in Arles as the epicenter of her narrative, Silverman delves deeply into each man's religious background. Her first chapter focuses on two early self-portraits that the artists dedicated to each other as gifts. As each believed deeply in the power of symbolic portrayal, the portraits reveal much more than physical likeness. Her exploration of why van Gogh represents himself as a Buddhist monk, while Gauguin portrays himself as a social outcast, is trenchant and sure. The argument that she posits here—that the artists differ fundamentally in their visions of the artist's place in society and in their differing views of Christ—is a profound one. In later years, Gauguin would portray himself as Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, still following the impulse to oppose the material world while van Gogh would studiously avoid any martyr's role; ironically the martyr's palm has been given to him posthumously.

In another chapter devoted to two important paintings that predate the artists' experiment in living together—van Gogh's *Sower* (1888) and Gauguin's *Vision after the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with an Angel* (also 1888)—Silverman convincingly lays out the aesthetic perspective and religious fervor of each artist. While it is no surprise that van Gogh's *Sower*, inspired by the example of Jean-Francois Millet, elevates the common man to a near ecstatic level, or that Gauguin's *Vision after the Sermon* presents a miracle of faith, the author's research transforms these old ideas into insightful commentary. Using these paintings, she defines the distinct path that each artist would take to achieve a sacred art (described by each as symbolism). Again her insight is to investigate the theological sources for Gauguin's "flight to metaphysical mystery" in his youthful studies at the Petit Seminarie de la Chapelle-Saint-Mesmin where Bishop Dupanloup (an educational reformer) stressed what Silver-



Seeing things others don't

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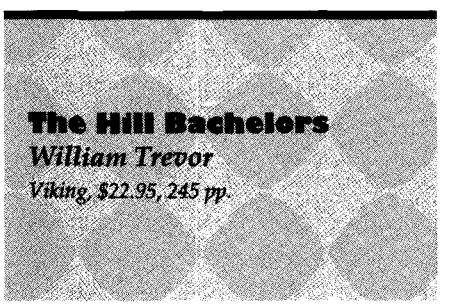
man terms "idealist antinaturalism." Similarly, she uncovers a connection between van Gogh's efforts to "naturalize divinity" and the importance of emotional piety, personal humility, and social service in the religious beliefs of his parents who themselves were adherents of the reformed movement know as the Groningen School.

The choice of van Gogh and Gauguin as the subjects of this investigation is by no means arbitrary. The son of a Dutch minister, van Gogh experimented with Protestant Evangelism before turning to art. Gauguin is equally well placed to warrant the investigation of his religious roots. His preoccupation with the sins of carnality, his exploration of Catholic iconography in a modern context, and his late anti-Catholic writings suggest an ongoing interior dialogue with the church. Silverman's rigorous analysis, which includes important new research as well as the comparative discussions of paintings by the two artists, establishes a role for what William James distinguished as institutional religion—as opposed to personal religion, long since acknowledged as a source for abstract art—in a previously secular arena. Of course, the danger of such a weighty insight is that it may cause one to lose perspective. Searching for proof of institutional religion in two artists who no longer practiced the faiths of their childhoods is an inexact science. Gauguin is the easier target, in part because of his use of Christian imagery and his ongoing confrontation with Catholicism. Van Gogh, however, who never visibly aligned with or distanced himself from Dutch Reformed Protestantism or battled against it in print, is more difficult to assess in such terms. While most would agree that his search for the sacred was embodied in his paintings, it is hard to attribute, as Silverman does, the characteristics of his style—the thickly applied paint, the framing devices, and the woven textures of his compositions—to Protestant ideals of labor and individual worth. Rather they can be viewed as artistic choices made by a sophisticated individual conversant with the history of art as well as the arts and crafts of his own time. The final chapter of her book, which focuses on van Gogh's métier, provides a weak ending to an otherwise excellent investigation.

Both van Gogh and Gauguin have suffered from the one-dimensional portraits that have evolved from their status as icons of modernism. Van Gogh's artistic ambition to create what he called "an art of feeling," generally attributed to his own sensitivity to human suffering, should now be seen in the context of a broader cultural philosophy. Similarly, to see Gauguin in the context of Catholic thought, to understand his visions of heaven and hell in the context of a seminary education, is to realize how deep his division between reality and the realm of the imagination cuts. Certainly these two artists will always remain mysterious, but Silverman's key to Gauguin's *vanitas* and van Gogh's ecstatic vision is a valuable addition to the study of modern art. Not incidentally, the book is also an introduction to the study of popular piety in nineteenth-century France and Holland. Silverman's hope that this book will encourage viewers to "look differently at van Gogh's and Gauguin's works" is too modest. She will succeed in encouraging readers to view the art of the nineteenth century with new eyes. □

Donna Gustafson *is curator of exhibitions at the American Federation of Arts.*

STORIES YOU LIVE WITHIN



Daniel M. Murtaugh

The Hill Bachelors gives strong support to the growing consensus that William Trevor is one of the very best writers of short stories alive. One can open this book, pick a paragraph at random, and imagine dozens of ways Trevor could have written it less effectively and did not, ways he could have added, or failed to excise, a word or phrase that would have made it easier, more explicit, but less focused in its power to disturb or to force recognition.

The stories, a dozen in this collection, are set in Ireland, England, and France, and many of them gently unravel mysteries. Following Horace's recipe for effective narration, they drop us—in medias res—into situations already defined. Then, in the reticent modern manner established by Chekhov and Joyce, they provoke us to ask the questions that Homer and Virgil (Horace's reference points) explicitly put to the muse: what is this scene that we have happened upon and what brought (what brings) these characters to it? In some of the stories, the characters themselves ask this question, and the crisis, usually muted, is their discovery of the answer. In others the characters know the answer only too well and have covered it with a muffling scar tissue, so that we, though privy to their thoughts, only gradually become aware of its true outlines.

The latter procedure is difficult to bring off. Joseph Heller did it—on a different scale and with technical means that Trevor denies himself here—in *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*. To be successful, the author must convince us that the delayed revelation, which serves his needs as a storyteller, also serves the needs of the characters whose minds we have entered. The inhibitions that characters impose on their speech are irrelevant here. We must accept as credibly motivated and not dishonestly contrived an evasion, within the characters' very thoughts, of memories that have given their lives their essential forms.

Two stories illustrate this procedure, and, although both are affecting, they achieve different levels of success. "Low

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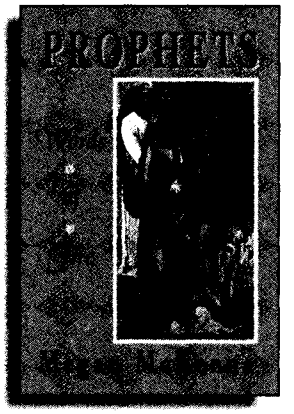
Sunday, 1950" introduces us to Tom and Philippa, a brother and sister whose enduring relationship and joint occupancy of a deceased aunt's suburban house both relate to their father's violent death in Dublin in 1916. Now, at age forty-two, Tom seems about to marry, and Philippa, three years younger, will vacate the house, anticipating a life as a maiden aunt in a downtown Dublin flat. The evasions that delay our recognition of this prospect have a clear motivation in the siblings' regard for one another. One understands, as well, Trevor's design in retarding the story of the father's death as a parallel revelation. But the needs of his design are not those of Tom and Philippa. Low Sunday is the anniversary of that death, and its story is uppermost in their minds. In the very first paragraph, Philippa wonders "if her brother could possibly have forgotten what Sunday it was," and it is the author's hand, only just too visible, that stops the current of her thought.

"Three People," on the other hand, is entirely successful in its manipulation of memory in the service of both narrative structure and character. Sidney, a thirty-four-year-old janitor who is perhaps mildly retarded, does handyman chores for Vera, a forty-one-year-old woman who lives with her old and declining father. In the father's eyes, their relationship is a protracted, diffident courtship. They carefully sustain this belief, nicely symbolized by a rosebush in the backyard, to hide from him the truth about a terrible event that brought the three of them together fourteen years earlier. In deluding the father, Vera and Sidney partly delude themselves as well. These intersecting, willed delusions motivate the fragmented unfolding in the minds of all three of what really happened. But the delusions will not outlast the father. "Without him," Vera knows, "there would be no reason to play these parts; no reason to lose themselves in deception...without her father, they would frighten one another." This story is an astonishing performance.

Three other stories also deal with male-female relationships—marriages in these cases—completed in ways not at first understood by the presence of a



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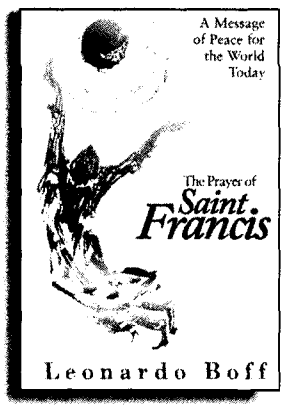

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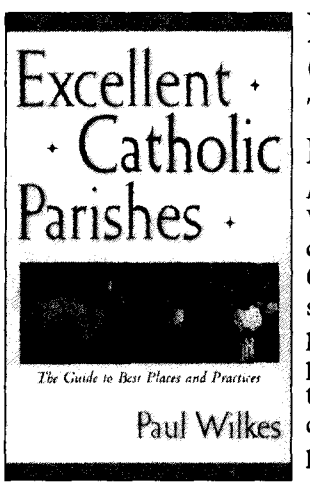

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third person. In "Good News," a child actress wins a role in a TV mystery, thereby financing the reunion of her pushy stage mother with her charming but feckless father. In the process, the nine-year-old is disturbed by the half-understood sexual content of the program and the abusive attentions of the leading man. In "A Friend in the Trade," the decision of a happily married couple in their fifties to move to Sussex precipitates the wife's recognition that a self-absorbed, "unpresentable" friend who has haunted their London house has been in love with her since her children were infants. In "Death of a Professor," a false obituary planted as a hoax by students leads its subject, by surprising indirection, to the discovery of a colleague's bitter jealousy of his marriage to a beautiful, much younger woman.

Three of the best stories, "Of the Cloth," "The Virgin's Gift," and the book's title story, deal with a different sort of mystery, the kind that is enacted rather than unraveled. In the first two, the mystery is literally religious, and in the last it is something very like that. The protagonists make important renunciations of "the world" in favor of something in a different dimension, revealed by unlooked-for intuitions of spiritual wholeness. An old Anglican rector and a young Catholic priest find their churches, in different ways, obsolete, and yet discover that between them they have transformed the life of a disabled farm worker. A monk responds to dream visions of the Virgin that order him further and further into contemplative isolation on and beyond Ireland's west coast and thence, magically or blessedly, back into the circle of his parents' love. Five children gather to bury their father, and the youngest, a disregarded bachelor, renounces the hope of marriage to take over the unwanted family farm in the hills that "had waited for him, claiming one of their own" as his father had never done. It is rare to find such themes—such difficult happy endings—so convincingly treated in modern English. □

Daniel M. Murtaugh *teaches at Florida Atlantic University.*

HELLO MODERNITY

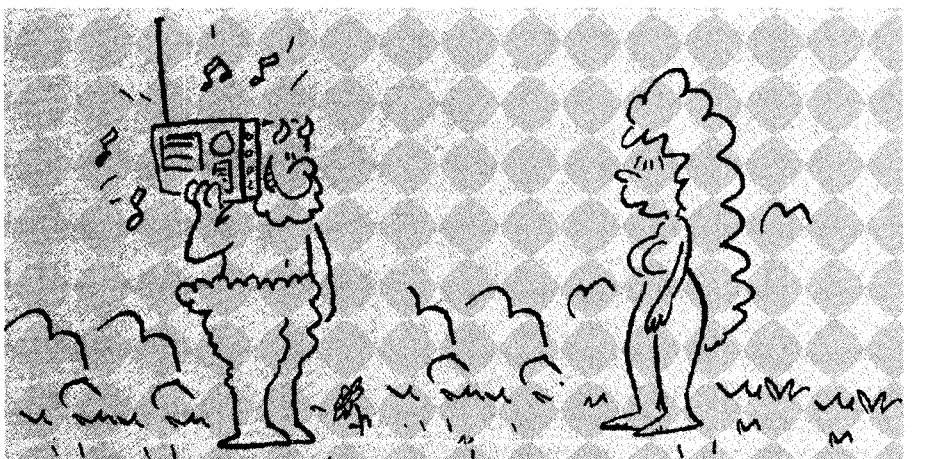
Goodbye to Catholic Ireland
Mary Kenny
Templegate, $19.95, 312 pp.

Mark Patrick Hederman

Mary Kenny is one of the few people on the planet who regret saying goodbye to "Catholic Ireland." Her definition of this reality and the reason for her regrets are catalogued in this book, first published in London in 1997. This is a revised and updated edition with contributions at the end from Maeve Binchy, John Banville, Pierce Brosnan, Andrea Corr, Austin Flannery, Frank (Seventh Earl of) Longford, Edna O'Brien, Peter Sutherland, Pauline McLynn, and Tony O'Reilly.

Kenny, a well-known journalist in Britain, starts with a description of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*—both the book and the movie: "Alan Parker might as well have made a film called *How All Irish People Are Absolutely Horrible.* For there is scarcely anyone in the whole story of provincial Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s with an ounce of humanity. The McCourt family are all vile: the father is an aimless drunk, and the mother a weak slut. The grandmother is a bigoted old bitch and the aunt is an embittered, scolding spinster...If the family is awful, the neighbors are ugly and mean-spirited, the representatives of the Irish state are cruel and hard-hearted, and teachers, with one exception, are sadistic, twisted tyrants...It goes without saying that the Catholic church is sneering, cruel, and exploitative."

Kenny's Catholic Ireland presents a very different picture. She gives an overview covering the last century, and her book is full of information, data, and facts. However, even though there are sixteen pages of bibliography, there are no footnotes. Kenny refers us for these to the original 1997 edition. The result is that half the book is factual, researched, and based on a solid array of scholarly evidence, meriting the accolade from Conor Cruise O'Brien in the *Daily Telegraph,* that it should be "read by anyone with a serious interest in Ireland or Roman Catholicism." However, the other half is quirky, chatty, smug, tendentious, and exasperating. And there is no at-



"What happened to your little pipes?"

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tempt to differentiate between the two. Kenny does not concede much to the typical notion of Catholic Ireland. For most punters, for example, Irish Catholicism is fundamentally connected with nationalism. The Green Flag and the song "Faith of Our Fathers" are emblems and anthems that frame the "National" creed.

We are presented here with a new phenomenon which we might call "Kenny Catholics," because it refers mostly to the way in which Mary Kenny's family, all of whom are mentioned by name, regard or regarded themselves as being staunch upholders of the faith. She forgets to mention that she herself was a late adherent to the family cause. Kenny spent her dashing youth as an outraged liberal burning her bra and driving train loads of contraceptives from Belfast to Dublin to spread the good news of the sexual revolution.

I don't think anyone can quarrel with her conclusions: "The church has been rocked; society is more secularized; prosperity is altering culture; Catholic power has receded." All these propositions are ungainsayable. People like myself also share her hope that "the faith goes on." This hope is based on the thesis that "at all times in history, the Catholic church in Ireland came from the heart and soul and will of the Irish people. It was not an invading or occupying force: it grew organically out of the soil, the land, the sea, the climate, the sky."

That is all very beautiful and poetic and I agree with it, as would those who support Celtic spirituality, nature religion, pantheism, etc. The difficulty comes when we try to define more clearly what is meant by "it." And Mary Kenny's next sentence is where I begin to part company with her: "At all times it reflected the values of Irish society, as well as reacting to values and trends in universal culture." And here is where we are sucked into the smug, claustrophobic atmosphere of middle-class bourgeois Kenny Catholicism. This worldview is described in personal anecdote and is woven from individual taste and idiosyncratic selection of evidence. Thus, she ends the last chapter "What Heritage for Catholic Ireland?" with a quote from a Mrs. Catherine Broadberry, whose only claim to authority is that she was born in County Meath in 1930 and happened to write a letter to Mary Kenny in 1995 describing the Catholic values of her childhood. Broadberry says, "I have with me still my mother's well-thumbed prayer book, with its devotions and prayers so ardently offered up: thus the faith was transmitted, as a pearl beyond price, which should raise our hearts and fill our souls with rapture."

Such maudlin rhetoric and sentimentality presumably makes half of her readership puke, while the other half reach for a Kleenex. Whatever effect the punchline has, it cannot stand up to any serious critical analysis.

Kenny Catholics, of course, read Chesterton and Belloc and sneer at any "spirituality" that is not "recognized." They also believe "in a 'united Ireland' in the near future, but not the united Ireland of song and story...some kind of a 'reconstituted Ireland,' possibly based on a federal system, which will knit together North and South in economic cooperation." Here one would read *The Furrow, The Capuchin Annual, The Messenger of the Sacred Heart,* and one might wear the green scapular. After all, we are told by the author near the end of her analysis of Catholic Ireland, "I personally believe that there will be a resurrection of the values it represented and a continuity of the faith itself." What this might mean for issues like divorce, for instance, is somewhat ambiguous. Kenny, with her usual scientific clarity, informs us that the 1995 referendum carried the motion to allow for divorce in Ireland by 818,842 (50.3 percent) to 809,728 (49.7 percent). She then tells us that it was "a rainy and inclement day" in the West of Ireland where "No votes" were stronger; "had the sun shone for a couple of hours, the result might have tilted the other way."

Who knows? Perhaps in the new referendum on divorce conducted by the Kenny Catholics in a reunited Ireland, the sun might be shining all day long! □

Mark Patrick Hederman *is a monk of Glenstal Abbey in County Limerick, Ireland. He is the author of* Kissing the Dark *(Veritas).*

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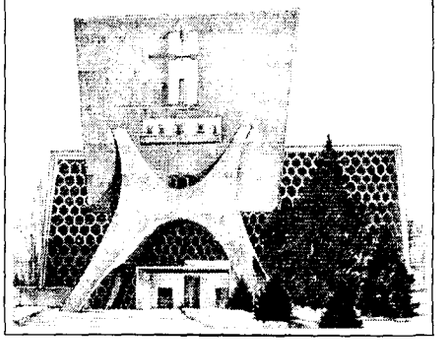

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RELIGION BOOKNOTES

Lawrence S. Cunningham

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) is a giant of the medieval era. Monk and mystic, monastic theologian and papal counselor, hagiographer and polemicist, a renowned preacher in the cloister and beyond it, Bernard was the single most important impetus for the spread of the Cistercians. Gillian R. Evans's new sketch of Bernard for the Oxford "Great Medieval Thinkers" series is a fine addition to her estimable *The Mind of Bernard of Clairvaux* (Oxford, 1983), and to her edition of Bernard's writings for the "Classics of Western Spirituality" series (Paulist, 1987).

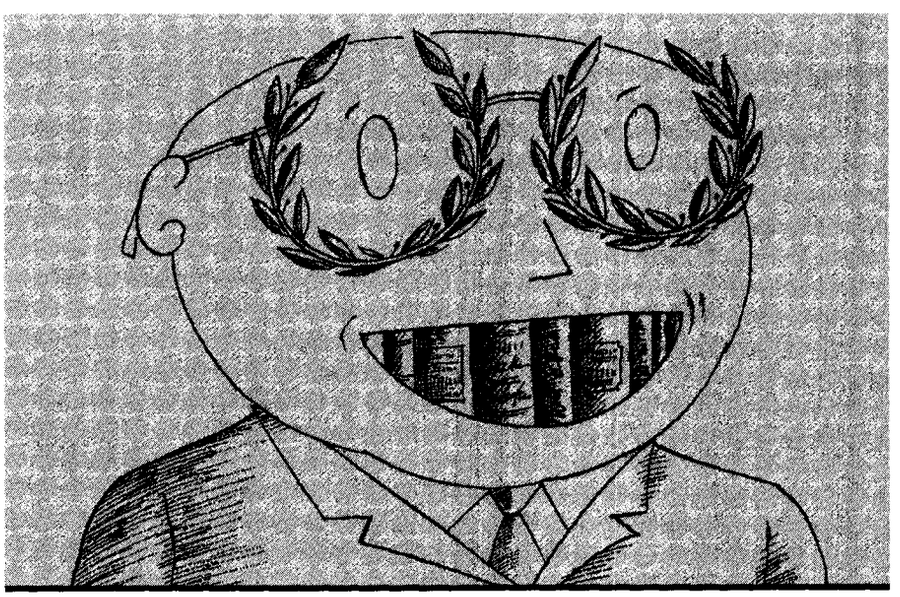
Bernard of Clairvaux
Gillian R. Evans
Oxford University Press, $18.95, 220 pp.

In the opening chapter of *Bernard of Clairvaux*, Evans outlines Bernard's life, devoting subsequent chapters to his written work. She explores Bernard's attitude toward the new dialectical theology, his method of exegesis, his thinking about ethics and politics, and his positive and negative theology. (By the latter she means his polemics against heresy and schism.) Throughout it is clear that Evans has a full command of the vast corpus of Bernard's writings and an equal command of his culture.

Full command does not signify total sympathy. Evans does not hesitate to enumerate Bernard's shortcomings. As a proponent of orthodoxy, Bernard was a restless theological street fighter. Both Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers followed his model to their disadvantage. Nor does Evans make too large a claim for Bernard as an original theological thinker. That honor belongs to his contemporary (and biographer), the Benedictine turned Cistercian, William of Saint-Thierry.

Bernard's strength, rather, is found in the power he was able to bring to bear on language. "Bernard minded most that his words should strike chords and make people enthusiastic for God." In this Evans echoes the late Etienne Gilson, who once said that the early Cistercians gave up everything for God except the art of writing well. Evans frequently cites lines of Bernard in Latin to illustrate his almost aphoristic style but, alas, does not always provide the translation.

The brevity required by the series does not permit Evans the luxury of considering all aspects of Bernard's thought. A more sustained reflection on Bernard's sermons on the Song of Songs, one of the most important mystical texts of the medieval world, would have been welcome. What Evans has provided, however, is a well-written and masterful introduction to this great monastic contemplative and doctor of the church.



One could list any number of clichés about Saint John of the Cross. He was the champion of the Dark Night of the Soul. (He wrote *The Dark Night* but never added "of the soul.") He was a reclusive contemplative. (Yes, he was contemplative, but no recluse: Federico Ruiz estimated that he walked more than seventeen thousand miles during his lifetime.) He spent his whole life in prayer. (In fact, he was an able administrator, drew and painted, designed and constructed an aqueduct, knew the arts of husbandry and farming.)

What is undeniable is that, although John was a writer mainly by accident, his work constitutes one of the great treasuries of Christian spiritual writing. Considered as a whole, it is a work of theological genius. English speakers owe an inestimable debt to Kieran Kavanaugh for his intelligent and luminous translation of the complete John, which supersedes the translations of E. Allison Peers, and is available from the Institute of Carmelite Studies for the giveaway price of less than twenty dollars.

Saint John of the Cross
By Kieran Kavanaugh
Crossroad, $16.95, 216 pp.

Kavanaugh's present work is an excellent addition to the uneven Crossroad Spiritual Legacy series, and beckons the uninitiated to enter the world of John. A feature of the series is to mix commentary with actual texts. Kavanaugh follows the procedure. Poems from *The Spiritual Canticle, The Dark Night, The Living Flame of Love,* along with the original sketch that John made for *The Ascent*, and his famous drawing of the crucifixion can be found here. Kavanaugh briefly outlines John's life and place in his culture. John's own description of the spiritual journey—from his prescriptions for Christian asceticism to his final experiences of the Christian life—is well treated. As Ka-

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vanaugh astutely observes, that journey ends not in darkness but in the energizing flame of the Holy Spirit.

Kavanaugh's gift for translating John's scholastically informed language into our own allows him to get closer to John's intentions than is usual. It has been all too easy to think that John is only interested in the "soul" or that he favors the suppression of all "appetites." Also praiseworthy is Kavanaugh's emphasis on John as a close reader of Scripture, and as a person of the church with a wide apostolic mission to direct others in the life of contemplative prayer. John had an absolute disdain for bad spiritual directors whom he ranked with Satan. And unlike his contemporary, Teresa of Avila, John had little patience for the epiphenomena of mystical prayer. He felt the visions and locutions were distractions, and he argued that a Christian might take more pleasure in them than in seeking union through the love of God.

John had one profound insight at the heart of his religious experience. From it, he built a theology of the life of prayer. The insight was this: God once spoke his Word and having spoken that Word need speak no more. That Word resonates not only through creation, as the prologue of the Gospel of John says, but is in human history in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:14). How can we—how do we—receive that Word? John of the Cross's answer is that we need to live fully the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.

John's single-mindedness does not mean that he is simple to read. Many of his writings were done ad hoc. His prose commentaries to the poems attract disproportionate attention at the expense of the very art that, while difficult and full, outstrips the commentary. Scholars like Kieran Kavanaugh give us the courage to try. In fact, a little excursus on how to read this great figure of contemplative prayer and in what order to read him would have made Kavanaugh's excellent work a perfect one.

A few years ago, Peggy Rosenthal coedited *Divine Inspiration*, a wonderful anthology of world poetry about Jesus. Rosenthal now gives us *The Poets' Jesus*,

The Poets' Jesus: Representations at the End of the Millennium
Peggy Rosenthal
Oxford University Press, $29.95, 198 pp.

a study of how Jesus appears in modern poetry. Her scope remains international and her new book includes, in addition to the familiar canon, virtually unknown voices from Africa and the Arabic-speaking world. Many of the poets Rosenthal discusses write not out of devotion, but inspired by the rich possibilities of the elusive figure of Jesus. Her widely cast net results in a book that both sprawls and, of necessity, omits.

Because her subject is modern poetry, Rosenthal's opening chapter rapidly surveys, by way of orientation, the figure of Jesus in poetry up to the eighteenth century. This is the weakest chapter since, given the myriad of possibilities, it merely skims giants like Dante, Milton, and Donne. In the second chapter we land

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If Christianity—without losing its soul—is yet to avoid losing touch with the world, it must constantly update itself by dialogue with all the intellectual currents of today. To this end, the author proposes a necessary two-way ***dialectic*** between theology and the world: an ongoing dialectic ultimately essential to both church and world.

on surer, more engaging ground as Rosenthal analyzes poets who locate Jesus in the romantic garb of the hero, presenting a sublime figure in vivid natural settings. By contrast, the poets of chapter three, reflecting the nineteenth-century deconstruction of the gospel stories, present a Jesus who is unrisen (Clough), or a weakling (Baudelaire), or pejoratively compared to the pagan Pan (Ruben Dario). Swinburne, the paradigmatic poet of this tendency in his observations on the pale Galilean, is strangely absent.

Two other chapters explore the image of Jesus in African and Arabic poetry, and still two more take up the theme of Christ's absence as expressed in the writings of Rilke and Borges as well as Samuel Beckett, Czeslaw Milosz, and the Welsh poet and priest, R. S. Thomas. Rosenthal contrasts these with poets for whom, and poems in which (for example, W. H. Auden's "Horae Canonicae"), we are absent to Jesus rather than he to us. In the words of the New Zealand poet James K. Baxter, "When his Tears ran down like blood/I was sleeping in my clothes." The final chapter treats poets, among them Richard Wilbur, Denise Levertov, Annie Dillard, for whom Jesus remains present.

Readers will wish to add poems and poets to Rosenthal's list. Why not the moving lines of Edith Sitwell on the London raids of 1940 ("Still falls the rain/at the feet of the starved man hung upon the cross")? Why not African American spirituals? What we might add would not contradict Rosenthal's penetrating understanding of the diverse modulations of modern poetry about Jesus, which is the real merit of her book. She shows Jesus not only transformed in the crucible of modernism, but lingering there as an absence, as well as slowly returning to our consciousness. Disappointingly, the book lacks a bibliography of primary poetic sources to guide those seeking more poems.

Where Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936) is known among English-speaking readers, it is because of his great work *The Tragic Sense of Life* (1913), which has an honored place in the existentialist canon running roughly from Kierkegaard through Dostoevsky to Heidegger and Sartre. Unamuno wrestled with the agonizing tensions between belief and reason his whole life. Like many Spanish writers, he was haunted by his inherited Catholic background, but his sharp criticisms, his skepticism in the face of the then regnant scholastic articulations of faith, and his near contempt for the institutional church earned him the title of heretic.

For all of his distance from the church, Unamuno was stirred by religious questions and was a frequent retreatant at religious houses and monasteries like the Benedictine abbey of Silos (now familiar for its chant recordings). Between 1913 and 1920, Unamuno labored at a long poem (some twenty-five hundred lines divided into eighty sections and four books) inspired by the famous crucifixion painted in 1632 by Diego Velázquez for a convent in Madrid. The painting, known today as the *Madrid Crucifixion*, resides in the Prado.

The Christ of Velázquez
Miguel de Unamuno
Translated by Jaime R. Vidal
Franciscan Press, $19.95, 112 pp.

It is stunning. Jesus hangs upon the cross, a thorn-garland about his drooping head, his face half covered by long hair. Most striking is the dramatic chiaroscuro: the ghostly white of a dead body juxtaposed against the inky black background made all the more stark because the body obscures most of the cross. There is no other figure in the painting. The traditionally depicted mother, beloved disciple, and centurion are omitted. Only the dead Christ and darkness are present.

Unamuno does two things in this long poetic meditation. He seeks symbols from outside the poem to shed light on the painting's significance, and he scrutinizes it in detail in order to explicate the meaning of its sole figure. Unamuno meditates on the hair, forehead, eyes, nose, and mouth of Jesus in this dual fashion. These are the parts of a man who sees and savors the world in which we live, but who also has an instinct for the hidden realm of God: "Your flowing mane covers and veils your ears/like a symbol designed by God your Father/Our

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faith finds not its base on what is told us/but on whether we have heard."

In his prefatory essay, translator Jaime Vidal persuasively argues that the poem can be read in a perfectly orthodox way, pace the vehement reaction against Unamuno and his poem by the *bien pensants* of Opus Dei in Spain. It is not a work to read in one sitting; parts are overlush, but there are moments of great beauty and passion made all the more moving by half-hidden parallels to the language—of silence, abandonment, and solitude—of John of the Cross.

Vidal's translation is enhanced by unobtrusive scriptural citations at the text's side and illuminating footnotes, which flag Spanish word play as well as patristic and medieval sources for some of the more recondite references in the work. Apart from its intrinsic merit, Unamuno's poem hints how one might be inspired to reflection and prayer by what the Greek fathers called (in reference to icons) gazing—that long meditative attention to a masterpiece which, by definition, has a surplus of meaning. □

Lawrence S. Cunningham *teaches theology at the University of Notre Dame.*

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The review process for applications will begin April 10, 2001 and continue until the position is filled. Applications should include a letter of interest, a statement of philosophy of academic leadership, current curriculum vitae, and the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of at least five references. All correspondence should be sent to: Dr. John Oppelt, Provost, Bellarmine University, 2001 Newburg Road, Louisville, Kentucky 40205, ATTN: A. Becker; Phone: (502) 452-8359; Fax: (502) 452-8162; Email: abecker@bellarmine.edu

(Continued from page 4)

hear confessions—many are compassionate and have a gift of knowing just what to say. Lucky the person who knows one. Most people don't.

Like the sacrament of the sick, where change would also be appropriate, maybe someday we'll see others empowered with the administration of this sacrament. As the nine-year-old said a couple of years before, at her first confession, "You know, I would feel much more comfortable talking with a girl."

TOM BAKER
Princeton, N.J.

Repression or sin?

I was in eighth grade when Ernest Hemingway killed himself. My classmates and I were assured by the parochial-school nuns that he had committed a mortal sin, with what grave implications for his soul we understood too well. Today, we know that Hemingway suffered from clinical depression.

In high school I was taught to regard Elizabeth Taylor as the most despicable woman since Jezebel. Today it seems likely that no marriage tribunal in the land would rule that even one of her marriages was an indissoluble sacramental union.

And let's not forget that whole meat-on-Friday curiosity: one week a mortal sin, the next week "Never mind!"

In short, some Catholics may wonder why they should confess today to a sin that may be no biggie tomorrow. I suspect also that some Catholics think the church should put its own house in order before demanding repentance of its members. The pope has apologized for the church's historic sins, but words are not actions. Where are the wives of priests who are not Episcopalian converts? Where are the women priests? Where are the reparations for inmates of Ireland's Magdalen laundries? Where is the "Never mind!" for *Humanae vitae*?

ANGELA STOCKTON
Clermont, Fla.

Expand the options

Talk about doing things by species and number! *Commonweal* devoted (by my count) some four hundred lines to O'Toole, Donnelly, Marget, and Steinfels on the subject of confession. Of those lines, only eleven gave thought to a change in format of sacramental confession.

We are mistaken if we think that the long-line, once-a-week, species-and-number confession that we knew several generations ago is a *desideratum* to be returned to today. Public general absolution (used during World War II for the military and perhaps for others as well) was just as theologically valid a means of sacramental forgiveness as the one-on-one modality that the Roman legal mind developed and laid upon the faithful.

Continue the availability of the private "box" confession, and its more modern derivatives? Yes, by all means. There is a definite place for it. Provide public general absolution when and where indicated in view of the felt needs of so many of today's faithful for sacramental pardon and peace? Yes, too, by all means. There is a definite place for it.

(REV.) G.F. WERMER
Edgewood, N.M.

Remorse & ashes

Commonweal's articles on the decline in the practice of confession were far-ranging and enlightening. The decoupling of confession from Communion and changes in the notion of sin would certainly have to rank high among factors accounting for the decline of the practice of confession.

But there are other things to consider. First, the decline in the use of confession occurred at about the same time as the decline in attendance at Catholic schools. Second, the contraception debate gave many Catholics a clear conscience to receive Communion without confessing the use of birth control. Did this confident reliance on conscience perhaps creep into other areas? Third, in many parishes today, unlike fifty or a hundred years ago, the majority of Catholics are as well educated in general and as well read in church mat-

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ters as their priests. They are not as deferential as earlier parishioners to the judgments of the priest. For good or for ill, that deference was a strong bulwark of confession.

What's to be done? A few years ago our parish hosted several priests who provided unusual penance services. After the customary preliminaries—hymn, prayer, sermon—we were told to write a letter to the Lord acknowledging our sins. We then brought this letter forward and presented it to one of the priests who read it, said a few words, and tossed it into one of several small fires contained in cauldrons in the sanctuary. After people understood the format, these services were attended in extraordinary numbers. The church was packed. This service is not a final answer, but it seemed to be a grace-filled moment in which many, many people examined their consciences, confessed their sins, and felt the cleansing power of God's forgiveness.

LEO GAFNEY
Lakeville, Conn.

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On the menu

Kudos for Luke Johnson ("A Disembodied Theology of the Body," January 26).

Humanae vitae has been promulgated as a defense of Christian marriage and the idea that contraception is the culprit responsible for the sexual promiscuity of our age. As the mother of eleven, I contend that neither is correct.

The analogy between eating for nourishment and sex for procreation is too simplistic. Marital intimacy involves two people and has a more profound end than the begetting of children. The latter may take a few minutes but the rearing of children requires years of constant care and sacrifice. I marvel at the Creator's ingenuity in providing an impetus and reward whereby husband and wife reaffirm their love and commitment in sexual union. Humans are different from other animals in this regard.

To consider intercourse apart from the spiritual realm, for example, the mind and emotions, is to deny that these should be integral to arousal, fulfillment, and purpose. Nothing prostitutes the sexual act more than calculated planning (NFP).

I will personally attest to the anxiety and frustration created by the constant preoccupation with identifying the fertile period.

We intervene in nature with medications, operations, artificial supports, whenever the health of a person is at stake. There are many instances where the health of a mother and the well-being of the family demand birth control. In these instances the most reliable and least harmful method should be used. This may be more a medical decision than a theological one.

It is no secret that most fertile couples practice contraception. They are termed "Cafeteria Catholics." The hierarchy should be very troubled over this. If young people don't listen to our church in regard to human sexuality and marriage, is it because of credibility?

Yes, *Humanae vitae* needs to be revisited. There is much more at stake than birth control.

HAZEL G. STULTZ
Middletown, Md.

All in the family

Regarding William Pfaff's "The End of NATO" [February 23]: Yes, "Europe and the United States are different societies," but in spite of "different histories," North America and Europe have developed economically in tandem through the mercantile period, two industrial revolutions, as well as the currently evolving technological era. We call this amalgam of like communities the "Industrial West."

The miracle of the EU represents the belated recognition by Europeans that it is only through unity that they will remain an equal partner in that vibrant club. (And it would be shortsighted not to urge and assist Russia to join.)

The undeveloped regions of this world, in which the industrial West is vitally interested, are already leap frogging previous industrial revolutions into the technological age. At the same time, they are recognizing the needs and weaknesses shared by neighboring communities, and are finding strength in cooperation. Political union of one kind or another will take place.

The industrial West will continue to enjoy its productive supremacy only if it focuses independent adventurism on the part of its individual members into the good of the whole. It can do this only by strengthening the political and military bonds that unite the member nations.

It is in our best interest to continue close cooperation militarily with Europe. Surely there is a way that we can accommodate the rapid-reaction force. Let us first admit that we who are considered the protectors of Europe, did not react promptly in the Balkan disaster. Could the rapid-reaction force not be made an adjunct to an expanded NATO, each organization having its own predetermined contingencies for a call to action?

VAL BETTIN
Ventura, Calif.

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CHRIST RISES AT TAIZÉ

Mary Frances Coady

Whenever I think of Taizé, I remember the long outdoor lines for meals, the sandy soil underfoot during the sprint from the bunk-bed dormitories to the shower-and-toilet cabin, and praying that the rain would stay away.

And I remember the singing: above all, the Latin chant *Veni Sancte Spiritus* ("Come Holy Spirit"), the basses sounding first, then the tenors, and then the women's voices. At some point the children chime in and finally a single soprano voice soars in counterpoint to the great roaring wave of harmony. Over and over it is sung, until the full weight of the world's longings is caught up in the rhythm of the chant.

In the hills of Burgundy in eastern France, in a sprawling set of stone buildings and bunker-style huts, a group of people—numbering more than five thousand in the summer—celebrate the dying and rising of Jesus Christ in silence and song. They are here to love one another and learn how to spread that love, in small ways, throughout the world.

The Taizé community had its beginnings in 1940, when twenty-five-year-old Roger Schutz began helping wartime refugees. Soon after the war other men, Protestants and Catholics, joined him, and in 1949 they made a commitment to live together as celibate brothers in an ecumenical community. By the late 1950s people of all ages, but especially the young, were coming to Taizé to pray. They still do.

They come by the busload and put up with camp-style accommodations and simple meals. They spend time helping in the canteen, engaging in quiet conversation and scriptural reflection, or sitting in silence. Three times a day they converge on the long building that is the community's central focus, The Church of the Reconciliation. There the famous Taizé chants are sung, interspersed with Scripture readings and periods of silence.

The week works its way up to the Friday-Saturday-Sunday triduum. On Friday evening, the chanting is somber and haunting: "*Bleibet hier...*" ("Stay with me...watching and praying"). Brother Roger invites the children to sit with him, and they bunch up around him, holding lit tapers. The night prayer grows quieter: *Spiritus Jesu Christi* is chanted almost in a whisper, until it gradually fades into silence. People linger. Some approach an icon of the cross at the center of the church. Here and there the brothers stand and listen as people talk quietly to them.

On Saturday evening we're given candles as we enter the dimly lit church. An organ plays softly. A bank of candles and flowers surrounds the icons at the front of the church. Brothers appear one at a time and kneel in two lines down the center aisle. The bells outside start to ring. More brothers arrive, first in twos, then in bunches, nearly eighty of them, all ages, a white-robed vision. Brother Roger sits in the center section at the back, and the children again gather around him. The organ stops, a signal is given, all rise, and a single voice begins the chant, "Al-le-lu-ia." Then the whole assembly picks it up. After a reading and another chant, the children file down the aisles with lit tapers and begin lighting the tapers of the congregants. As flickers of light illuminate the whole great space, the choir begins to sing: *Surrexit Christus*, "Christ Is Risen." All join in and the chant goes on and on, with flute and trumpet now. I don't want it to end.

But it does, and Brother Roger speaks, in words that push us beyond the walls of this church. His message is aimed at those under thirty, but it hits the mark at any age. How can we work for peace, he asks, when each of us is only one person and we know so little? Write a letter to the people in Shantytown in Brazil, to children in Senegal, write to political prisoners. If someone hurts you, reply by doing good. There is no other path to the gospel, or to peace. The first step is to abandon ourselves to Christ, to commend ourselves to Christ, day by day; when we do, we know he is present in every situation.

On Sunday morning a Roman Catholic Eucharist is celebrated, culminating in the full-throated *Surrexit Christus*; again, I don't want it to end. But it does, and the brothers file out and disappear into their quarters. Tomorrow they will resume their round of work. They make their living by the work of their hands: pottery, printing, other handicrafts; the products are sold in the gift shop. Visitors make modest "donations" for accommodation and meals.

Outside, there is much milling about as the young people hug their goodbyes and sling huge packs onto their backs. Bus after bus drives up, lining the roadway that leads away from Taizé. Where do they go from here? Have they changed? Will they carry with them the sense of community, the uplift of prayer, the gift of solidarity with the world? Or will they cast off the great love-in and drift away?

For me, the experience of Taizé lingers. I think of the silence and the singing, the quiet talk in church and the chattering in many languages on the meal line. The rain came at night, and in the morning the shower-room floor was gritty with mud. But outside the sun shone. □

Mary Frances Coady *is a freelance writer based in Toronto. She is the author of* The Hidden Way *(Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998).*

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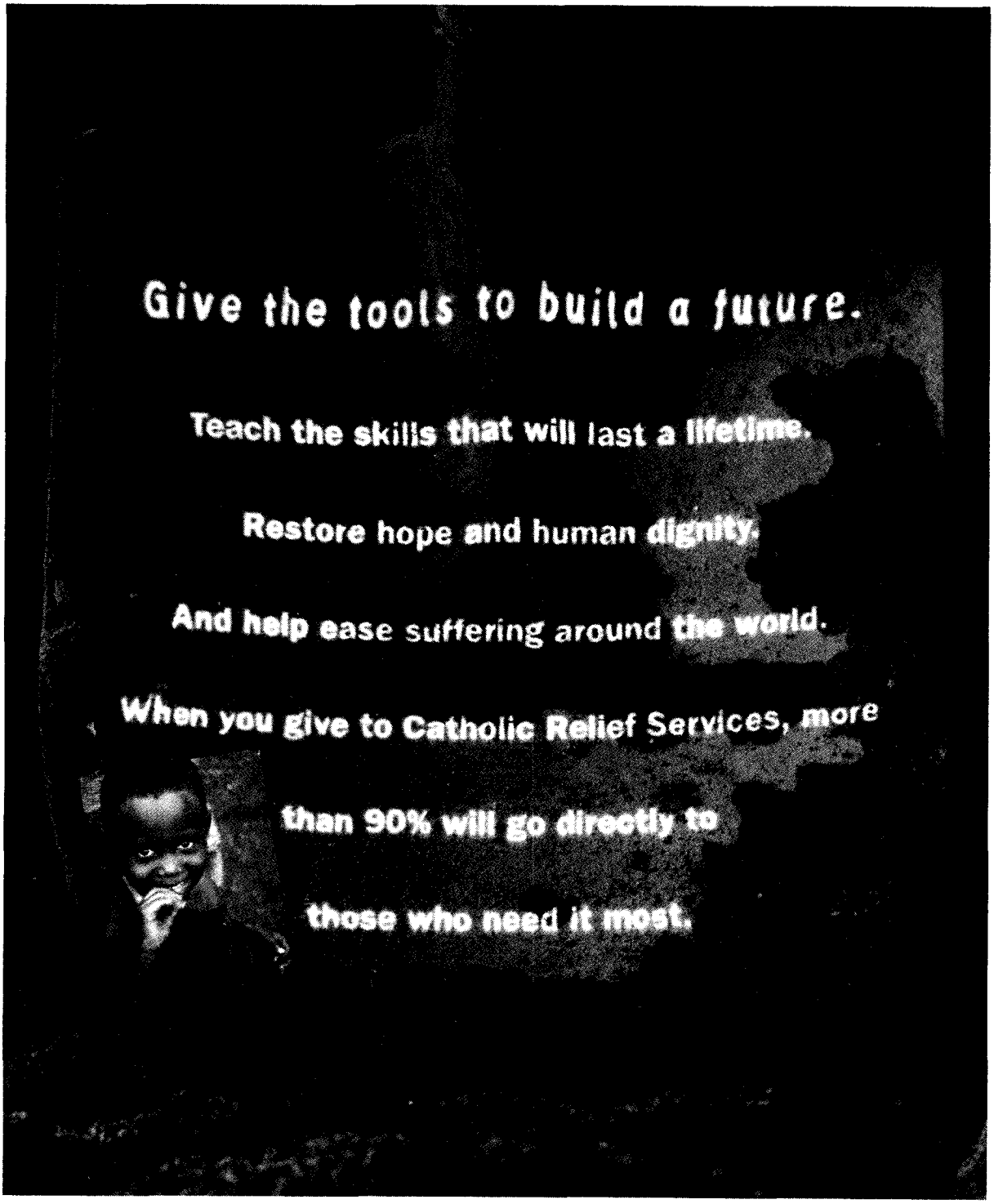
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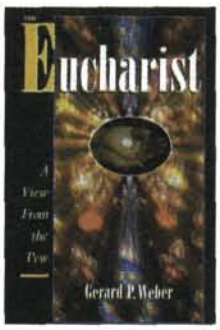

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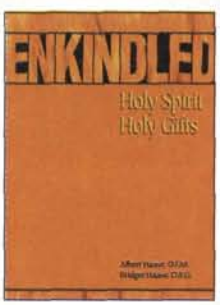
Albert Haase, O.F.M.
Bridget Haase, O.S.U.



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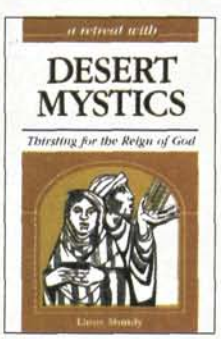

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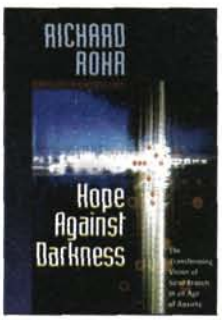
Richard Rohr, O.F.M., with John Bookser Feister



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